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Anne Collett

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Abstract

Full Version

KUNAPIPI

Journal of Postcolonial Writing & Culture



VOLUME XXXIV NUMBER 1
2012

Kunapipi is a biannual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with notes gathered at the end, and should conform to the Harvard (author-date) system. Submissions should be in the form of a Word or Rich Text Format file sent by email attachment to acollett@uow.edu.au. Image files should be high resolution tif format and submitted on compact disc if larger than 1mb. Please include a short biography, address and email contact.

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Front Cover:

Detail of El Anatsui, 'In the World But Don't Know the World?' 2009, Aluminium and copper, 10 x 5.60m, Photo Jonathan Greet, Image courtesy October Gallery London.

Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.

Contents

Editorial, <i>Anne Collett</i>	vi
A Tribute to Margaret Mary Lenta, 1936–2012 <i>Margaret Daymond and Johan Jacobs</i>	10
ARTICLES	
<i>James Ogude</i> , ‘Whose Africa? Whose Culture? Reflections on Agency, Travelling Theory and Cultural Studies in Africa’	12
<i>Ashleigh Harris</i> , ‘An Awkward Silence: Reflections on Theory and Africa’	28
<i>Grace A. Musila</i> , ‘Submerged Fault Lines: Interests and Complicities in the Julie Ward Case’	42
<i>Parselelo Kantai</i> , ‘The Reddykulass Generation’	60
<i>Tina Steiner</i> , ‘Writing on and over Communal Boundaries: East African Asian Subjectivities in Sophia Mustafa’s <i>In the Shadow of Kirinyaga</i> ’	81
<i>Andrew van der Vlies</i> , ‘Art as Archive: Queer Activism and Contemporary South African Visual Cultures’	94
<i>Maria Olausson</i> , ‘Africa’s Indian Ocean in Yvette Christiansë’s <i>Unconfessed</i> ’	124
<i>Christopher E.W. Ouma</i> , ‘Navigating the Lagos Cityscape in Chris Abani’s <i>Graceland</i> ’	141
<i>Susan N. Kiguli</i> , ‘Performer-Critics in Oral Performance in African Societies’	172
FICTION	
<i>T. Michael Mboya</i> , ‘The Letter’	155
POETRY	
<i>Gabeba Baderoon</i> , ‘I Cannot Myself’, ‘A Prospect of Beauty and Unjustness’ ‘How not to Stop’, ‘I Forget to Look’, ‘The Song of the Husband’, ‘Concentration’	117, 118 120, 121 122, 123
<i>Conceição Evaristo</i> , ‘Vozes-Mulheres’, ‘Women’s Voices’	170, 171
INTERVIEWS	
<i>Grace A. Musila</i> , ‘Writing History’s Silences: Interview with Parselelo Kantai’	71
<i>Claudia Maria Fernandes Corrêa and Irineia Lina Cesario</i> , ‘An Afro-Brazilian Griot: An Interview with Conceição Evaristo’	162
ABSTRACTS	189
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	193
NOTES ON EDITORIAL ADVISORS	196

EDITORIAL

When Grace Musila and Maria Olausson approached me about publishing a selection of articles derived from a conference panel entitled, ‘African Intellectual Archives’, it was an opportunity too good to miss. *Kunapipi* has not published as much African material (either by or about African writers, artists and scholars) since I took over editorship of the journal (upon Anna Rutherford’s death) as it was wont to do. This has not been due to a lack of interest, but more related to my distance from Africa (the journal having shifted base from Europe to Australia), to the loss of Kirsten Holst Petersen as a collaborator whose literary and artistic interest in Africa is well-known to scholars in the postcolonial field, and to the small amount of material I receive about or from Africa. This, then, is my chance to remedy that lack. I leave it to associate editors of this issue, Grace and Maria, to explain the genesis of the articles:

‘Most of the articles assembled in this special issue were developed from papers presented at the 4th European Conference on African Studies (ECAS 4) held at the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, in June 2011. The conference theme “African Engagements: On Whose Terms?” invited presenters to reflect on how to engage with Africa in ways that disrupt problematic patterns of scholarship, while creating space for mutual relationships of knowledge production that acknowledge Africa/ns as partners in the knowledge industry. For their part, Grace A. Musila and Maria Olausson convened a panel entitled “African Intellectual Archives: Cultural Productions and the Question of Theory”. The panel brought together a range of papers that variously reflected on why, despite increasing globalisation and technological developments, the flow of ideas and concepts seems to remain uni-directional across the North-South axis. This panel focused on African intellectual archives, with keen interest in African contributions to the global knowledge economy. Taking its cue from feminist theorist Obioma Nnaemeka’s reminder that,

[T]he imperial nature of theory-formation must be interrogated to allow for a democratic process that will create room for the intervention, legitimisation and validation of theories formulated ‘elsewhere’... [T]heory-making should not be a unidirectional enterprise — always emanating from a specific location and applicable to every location — in effect allowing localised constructs to impose a universal validity and application.

(362)¹

the panel sought to explore the trajectories of diverse practices and ideas emerging from the interaction of local and global histories as well as the means by which these ideas are expressed within African contexts. Of particular interest was the relevance of cultural productions as important sites for critical thinking and theorisation in and on Africa. In what modes, medias and genres does Africa contribute to our conceptual understanding of itself and its relationships with the

world? How can we trace the multidirectional legacies of African intellectual traditions in both African and global contexts? How can we re-think conventional methodological approaches to literary texts, from reading literary texts as “case studies” to reading narrative as articulations of conceptual formulations? What would “transcribing” a narrative register into a “theory register” entail? What insights do these interventions offer into Africa’s place in the world?

I leave you to reflect upon these questions as you read through the various contributions to this special issue. With the exception of the articles by Ashleigh Harris, Chris Ouma and Tina Steiner, the articles collected here were first presented at the conference, and Grace and Maria would like to acknowledge the ECAS 4 organising committee for affording them the platform to convene these important conversations. In addition to scholarly articles, this issue includes poetry by Gabebe Baderoon and Conceição Evaristo, an essay by Parselelo Kantai, a short story by T. Michael Mboya and interviews with both Kantai and Evaristo. Together, with the cover art by El Anatsui, this issue offers a vibrant forum for and about African literature, art, culture and scholarship in the contemporary world.

Trawling through the web looking for interesting contemporary art work by an African for the cover of this special issue, I came across the vibrant hanging sculptures of El Anatsui. The sheer beauty of colour, texture and movement, not to mention the monumental scale of the sculptures and the ingenious material from which they are crafted, could not help but capture my attention as it has captured the attention of the world. Susan Mullin Vogel² claims that ‘Anatsui is the first and only black African artist to achieve global recognition at the highest levels while living and working continuously in Africa’, and that ‘he has felt no need to study or work outside Africa, though he has had many formative residencies of a few months’ duration abroad’ (11). Although he grew up in Ghana, most of El Anatsui’s working life has been based in Nsukka, Nigeria, where he took up a position as Professor of Sculpture at the University of Nigeria and where he still directs a workshop that creates the ‘bottle top’ sculptures for which he has become famous. Anatsui’s artistic practice and intellectual life developed almost exclusively within an African art world: Vogel contends that until the mid-1990s ‘his thinking and his work took shape far less in dialogue with the works of contemporary American and European artists than in exchanges with Nigerian writers like Chinua Achebe ... Wole Soyinka ... and other African intellectuals. For two formative decades, his most involving debates were with African visual artists’ (16). But it was also in 1990 that Anatsui came to international notice as part of a group exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (*Contemporary African Artists: A Changing Tradition*); and in 1995, the October Gallery, London, hosted a solo exhibition (*El Anatsui: West Africa*).

Exhibiting work in Japan and the US throughout 1995 and 1996, Anatsui’s art began to gain currency outside Africa and gathered momentum throughout the first decade of the 21st century, the (first) high point of which was the acclaim he



El Anatsui, 'In the World But Don't Know the World?' 2009, Aluminium and copper, 10 x 5.60m, Photo Jonathan Greet, Image courtesy October Gallery London.

received when he exhibited in the Venice Biennale of 2007. Anatsui was at this point in his 60s with more than 30 years of art practice in various media behind him. He comments: ‘I’ve been to Venice four times now, twice as an exhibitor and twice as a visitor. When I first went, twenty years ago, I was cast in the light of an “African artist”, whereas in 2007, I was just another artist. The constraining label of being an artist from somewhere else has disappeared. That’s an important development’ (qtd Vogel 77). The work featured at the Venice Biennale was the metal ‘sheet work’, composed of flattened recycled bottle tops, that has become his signature. ‘I could spend the rest of my career using bottle tops,’ comments Anatsui, ‘because there’s an open-endedness — a sense of freedom present in this medium’ (qtd Vogel 70). These metal-fabric sculptures are curiously soft and fluid; their colours, textures and shapes are startlingly beautiful. The work, ‘In the World, But Don’t Know the World?’, of which a detail is featured on the cover of this issue, and is reproduced in full here, was presented (by El Anatsui and the October Gallery) at the Dubai Art Fair of 2010. I wish to thank El Anatsui and the October Gallery for generous permission to feature ‘In the World, But Don’t Know the World?’ in this special issue on Africa. The opportunity to learn about and support the work of contemporary artists is one of the many special things about editing *Kunapipi* that I will miss when my 15 years of editorship comes to a close with this last volume.

Anne Collett

NOTES

- ¹ Obioma Nnaemeka, ‘Negro-feminism: Theorizing, practicing and Pruning Africa’s Way’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29.2 (2003): 257–85.
- ² All quotes are from Vogel’s book, *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2012.

A Tribute to Margaret Mary Lenta, 1936 – 2012

Margaret Lenta died on Monday, 5th November after a courageous struggle with cancer. She was born and grew up in Northumberland, in the extreme north of England, and taught in Nigeria and Kenya before coming to South Africa in 1966. She joined the Department of English at the University of Natal in 1973. At the time of the merger leading to the formation of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, she had long been a full Professor in the discipline.

Over the forty years of her academic career, her research output was considerable and continued into her retirement. Her early focus was on the writing of the Enlightenment



period in Britain, but after completing a PhD on the eighteenth-century novelist, Samuel Richardson, she redirected her attention to developments in literature in Southern Africa. In this field she published more than thirty articles and ten chapters in books. She also edited five books, three of them the writings of Lady Anne Barnard. She is perhaps best known nationally for *The Castle and the Vineyard: Lady Anne Barnard's Cape Diaries*. Besides her scholarly articles, Margaret is known internationally as a founder-editor of the journal *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*. She helped to create the success of this journal, now in its 24th year, by guiding its policy and practices, by making it known at the many international conferences which she attended, and by liaising with its many reviewers and contributors. To celebrate the journal's coming of age, Margaret Lenta and Michael Chapman edited a special double issue which was subsequently extended and published as a book called *SA Lit: Beyond 2000*.

After retirement, Margaret Lenta added to her repertoire by writing reviews and articles for newspapers, particularly the *Sunday Independent* and *Business Day Weekender*. At the same time she offered her extensive research knowledge and skills to students whose first language was not English, mentoring many registered in the College of Humanities to the successful completion of Masters or Doctoral degrees. She also guided new staff in the production and publication of

their first research articles. Many of the students and staff members who enjoyed her help have remained her friends.

Margaret will be remembered by her colleagues as a warm-hearted, witty, lively and energetic person who was also a fine cook. She took a strong interest in the achievements, and the occasional sorrows, of all in the Department, and particularly in her younger colleagues. Since her death, several colleagues who are now abroad have written remembering her with affection as the person who helped to make their years in the Department the happiest time of their career.

She will be greatly missed by all who knew her.

Margaret Daymond
Johan Jacobs

JAMES OGUDE

Whose Africa? Whose Culture?

Reflections on Agency, Travelling Theory and Cultural Studies in Africa

WHOSE AFRICA?

unconscioOne of the most prevalent theories about Africa in the wake of postmodernist scholarship is the idea of Africa as an invention of the West. One of the chief proponents of this thesis is Valentin Mudimbe, the Zairean philosopher and literary historian now teaching in the USA. In his widely acclaimed book, *The Invention of Africa*, Mudimbe (1988) argues that the idea of Africa is a product of the West and was conceived and conveyed through conflicting systems of knowledge. The idea of Africa is therefore tied to the colonial library or archives, which represents a body of knowledge constructed with the explicit purpose of faithfully translating and deciphering the African object. Mudimbe makes an even stronger case for the role of dominant systems of power and thought in the construction of a hybrid African and black diasporic identity. He asserts that Africa as a coherent ideological and political entity was, indeed, invented with the advent of European expansion and continuously reinvented by traditional African and diasporic intellectuals, not to mention metropolitan intellectuals and ideological apparatuses — educational institutions and their attendant disciplines, traveller accounts, popular media and so forth. In this accommodationist tendency, Mudimbe is supported by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) in their common belief that Africa's embededness in the material and cultural terrain of the postcolonial and the postmodern is inescapable. As Kwaku Larbi Korang writes:

Africa, in the view of this tendency has been economically absorbed and culturally assimilated by the Metropolitan West into an imperial colonial modernity. As a direct consequence, Africa today, is the colonial aftermath, is a part of — and nothing apart from — the internalized commodity exchanges and the 'borderless' transnational cultural and intellectual circuits marked in contemporary understanding by the admittedly disputed designations 'postcolonial' and 'postmodern'. (445)

The 'posts', I hear Mudimbe and Appiah saying, reign supreme, whether as sites of 'space-clearing' as Appiah would have it, or simply as signs of the 'West valorized as a knowable *positivity* and imitable *totality*' (Korang 443).

Mudimbe and Appiah's thesis is of course in response to a wave of movement among African politicians and scholars who, after Africa's independence, moved to find a domain that could be defined as both unambiguously African and

resistant to imperialism. One of the corner-stone strategies of this movement was to identify African survivals here in the continent and in the so called New World in order to make a stronger case for the resilience and power of black culture. As Sidney Lemelle and Robin Kelley have argued, this body of scholarship and political thinking, which flourished in professional academic circles in the 1960s and 1970s, 'was an attempt to historicize the very movement that gave rise to the new historiography celebrating Africa's past and presumed cultural unity — a movement that included Pan-Africanist political and cultural struggles in Africa and the diaspora' (8).¹ For these thinkers, Africa's survival meant making a decisive break with modernity and rooting the continent in its own soil; its own cultural tradition that could be scratched and located beneath the surface of colonial legacy if only we had the will to scratch harder. Yet, for Mudimbe and Appiah, the position taken by the nationalist scholars amounts to intellectual hypocrisy because in framing their resistance in such purist terms, 'they have either ignored or underplayed the Western cognitive and discursive hegemony in which their own nationalist/modernist rhetoric and critical cultural work are unavoidably implicated' (Korang 447).

My aim in this essay is not to adjudicate with any finality between these two contradictory tendencies, although some form of judgment is inevitable. After all they both set out to restore some form of agency to the African subject, even if they end up undermining, in significant ways, the very aesthetics of agency of the African subject and its freedom. Instead, I want to use these debates to open up a neo-pragmatic understanding of agency in Africa that is both nationalist and post-nationalist because, as Kwaku Korang would argue, 'an Africa that aspires to worldly intelligibility and, in that, to world recognition — is enjoined to be both nationalist and post-nationalist' (454). By this I understand him to be saying that to realise a meaningful agency, the moment of enunciation, of self representation, implies that the margins cannot speak without grounding themselves in a known context. He is suggesting that, at the very least, Africa needs to develop some form of nationalitarian² consciousness before it can engage with the world. He is pointing to the fact that the tension between the nationalist and post-nationalist Africa is a necessary concomitant for a realistic reconstruction of an emancipatory model of agency. In this respect the Nigerian scholar, Biodun Jeyifo, is right in part when he argues that 'much of postcolonial African ... critical thought', has been largely confined to 'the exploration of Africa's place in the world' (356). In his judgment the postcolonial argument which posits Africa-for-the world tends to overlook what he regards as the central issue of African cultural politics, which 'is the relationship of Africa to itself, the encounter of African nations, societies, and peoples with one another' (356). Africa's internal dialogue with itself, and indeed Africa's self-representation, is important before Africa could unfold her being on a world stage. Jeyifo's dialogic proposition has a special historical and existential significance. Africa in the Western imagination has always been represented as

the ultimate other, the repository of emptiness and the domain of untranslatable cultures. It is nevertheless important to constantly challenge the nationalist agenda lest it becomes a death trap of cultural reification and political paralysis. This is what Stuart Hall has in mind when he writes that 'When the movements of the margins are so profoundly threatened by the global forces of postmodernity, they can themselves retreat into their own exclusivist and defensive enclaves. And at that point, local ethnicities become as dangerous as national ones' (1991 36). To escape this trap, nationalist Africa must always be in constant tension with post-nationalist Africa with the aim of engaging in subversive manoeuvres, even if within a tortured postcolonial and post-modern world, to engender a meaningful African presence in the world. This I think is a necessary tension that has been missing in the ideas of Africa elaborated by both the foundationalist and anti-foundationalist scholars.

Both Mudimbe's notion of Africa as a Western invention and Africa's foundational historians' search for Africa's survivals beneath the surface of colonialism seem to me problematic for other reasons too. It is true Mudimbe and like-minded scholars concede that the making of black culture and identity in general was as much a product of the West as it was indigenous to Africa. They also concede that the process that created the current Africa and the diaspora could not shape African culture(s) without Western culture itself being transformed. However, there is almost always some anxiety in their argument — the assumption that Africa has very little agency, if any, outside that created by colonialism and the West. This is the kind of anxiety I detect in the following statement by Mudimbe:

But truly for Africa to escape the West involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from it. It assumes that we are aware of the extent to which the West, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it implies knowledge, in that which permits us to think against the West, of that which remains Western. We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Occidentalism is possibly one of its tricks directed against us, at the end of which it stands, motionless, waiting for us. (11–2)

Here Mudimbe not only signals his awareness of Africa's embeddedness in the West, but more significantly, a resignation to the fact that Africa's influence was and continues to be on the terms set and imposed by colonialism/the West. This has tended to create a dilemma in which we express the desire to have a colonial subject or a former colonial subject that has a rich and complex consciousness, to exercise autonomous agency, and yet remain in the category of victim. Colonialism in the argument of these scholars remains resolutely colonial, despite the contradictions of its modernising projects and its insistence on policing all boundaries. This reading of colonial experience often ignores the fact that colonialism's interventionist power was quite often shaped by the local actions of the colonised. And yet, the view of colonialism as an all-consuming phenomenon that destroys everything in its wake, the view of colonial discourse that could

contain its challenges and tensions continues to persist. This view needs to be interrogated.

The earlier group of African scholars, although well meaning in their attempt to celebrate Africa's past and its presumed cultural unity, often failed to take account of the complex conditions, even if similar, in which African people produced and transformed culture. For example, Lemelle and Kelley have argued, that under colonialism, 'forced labour, European hegemony, and racial capitalism constituted a critical mix through which most Black Atlantic as well as African cultures were produced' (8). It is therefore simplistic to imagine that African cultural practices could have remained unchanged under British imperialism. Similarly, it was not possible for these cultural practices to survive intact after the middle passage in the New World. And yet, the nationalist scholars are often tempted to underplay this critical matrix and to privilege what is evidently a romantic view of African culture. For them, African cultures are timeless and unchanging — hence the fixation with the search for authentic African values. The danger with this approach is that it has tended to fuel a static notion of Africa and served to obscure, as Lemelle and Kelly write, 'the degree to which 'traditional' culture in any given historical moment is the product of bricolage, cutting, pasting and incorporating various cultural forms which, in modern times at least, become categorized in a racially/ethnically coded aesthetic order' (9). This reality has escaped most nationalist interpreters of African and African American culture who have either ignored or played down its cultural syncretism in order to demonstrate the presence of some pure African essence untouched by colonial modernity and global currents.³

Yet how does one talk of a cultural synthesis where the encounter between two cultures is defined by their economic difference? How does one conceptualise a hybrid culture in a context where one culture possesses a more developed economic and even military basis? How does one talk of hybrid culture in societies where 'Whiteness' saturates the public space within which we live our daily lives? Indeed how does one talk, for example, about globalisation without registering its tendency to homogenise and delete differences within its larger overarching framework? On this I want to concur with Stuart Hall's critical observation that 'the most important characteristic of this form of global culture is its peculiar form of homogenization', its ability 'to recognize and absorb cultural differences within larger overarching framework which is essentially an American conception of the world' (1991 28). Hence, for instance, the current world-wide predominance of neo-liberalism, and the new form of global mass culture which is essentially American, and one which dominates the entertainment and leisure industry, powered by its electronic images.

Similarly, in the past, before the USA emerged into the global scene, it was Britain that played the dominant role as the leading industrial and commercial world power. Indeed as Hall argues, the formation of the British society was intertwined

with the process of globalisation as the main agent of capitalist expansion. It is also not possible to understand the construction of the empire, without registering its manifestation as a global phenomenon, in which British cultural forms took the centre-stage. The English language syllabus, for example, was central to this hegemonic project. Hall has described the nature of such cultural identity as a 'strongly centred, highly exclusive and exclusivist form of cultural identity' (1991 20–21). The English had placed themselves at the centre of the world, reducing everybody else, not just the colonised, to the less powerful other. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has eloquently critiqued the exclusivist and hegemonic tendencies in Western imperial culture in his widely acclaimed text, *Moving the Centre* (1993). The thrust of Ngugi's argument is that those countries that have been at the centre of the process of globalisation as leading powers have normally constructed their national identities as being central, predominant, with a mission, able to name all other cultures as peripheral and inferior. This too is Steven Feierman's point when he writes in an excellent study of the 'peasant intellectuals' of Tanzania that:

If we define a people as different from us, then we have defined them as other, distant from us, not subject to the same historical forces or living in the same moral universe. This is unacceptable. But if we say that we are indeed coeval, living in the same era, subjects to the same historical forces, struggling with the same issues, then we lose the picture of cultural variation which is the heart of anthropology. (38)

How then does one resolve the tension between what is apparently an overwhelming influence of globalisation and an endangered localism? Indeed, how does one challenge the notion of globalisation as a non-contradictory, uncontested space in which everything is fully within the keeping of the institutions that can predict its destiny? The argument in this essay is that the acknowledgement of the tremendous effect of globalisation and the changes it has unleashed in the world need not translate into total fragmentation of the colonised subject and indeed a total loss of agency in which the former colonised subjects continue to have no voice. The idea of a decentred subject and its presumed effects on the formation of cultural identities has been grossly distorted to argue against any form of unitary identities or even the possibilities of forging a radical and liberationist consciousness in Africa. It has also been used to question the possibility of any form of enunciation by the marginalised from a specific position — a context which would allow for self-representation. And yet, in order to respond to these complex questions we need to return to the issue of agency.

THE RELEVANCE OF AGENCY

The perceived solution to the difficulty associated with globalisation and the way it tends to eclipse voices from the margins of its orbit has prompted, across the social sciences and humanities, a re-assertion of 'agency' on behalf of social actors and loud calls for (anti-)essentialism. 'Agency' connotes repudiation of 'victimhood' and a robust assertion of the social and cognitive capabilities of ordinary individuals. Anti-essentialism questions both the idea that identities are

naturally given and that people can have integral and unproblematic identities. By extension such arguments 'challenge accounts of collective identities as based on some "essence" or set of core features shared by all members of the collectivity and no others' (Calhoun 198). So in the field of African Studies more generally such arguments have provided some of the intellectual resources to proclaim a new world of 'creolisation' and 'glocalisation' (Hannerz 551). What this has meant is that the old myth of Africa of cultural authenticity or at the other extreme, Africa invented and sustained by European currents and discursive practices, gives way to Africa of bricolage and multiple modernities — Africa rooted in local cosmopolitanism. The manufacturing of local cosmopolitanism implies a re-imagination of the space of marginality as the space of voicing, as the space of power where the weak can begin to represent themselves. Indeed, this has been the nature of marginalised subjects: when they are faced by dominant regimes of authority, they struggle and acquire the means to speak for themselves. They recover their hidden histories, which are quite often forged from a social phenomenon which places emphasis on local initiative and agency, and relies on local resources sustained through popular memory or drawn from cultural survivals among ordinary people. And this was true of the movements of colonial nationalism as it is true of the movements of modern feminism.

Consequently a useful idea of Africa, I want to argue, will have to be negotiated between local imperatives and global demands; it is an Africa which simultaneously cries out for Africa-for-itself and a critical call of Africa-for-the-world. This is an Africa that is fully aware of its history with all its attendant contradictions, but one that is also willing to be judged by universal norms that hold humanity together. This I think is a healthy ambivalence. What this tension signals for scholars of African studies is that, 'the subjectivity of the African intellectual, however ambivalent, ought to be a site of struggle and not compromise' (Korang 453). And yet, too often we surrender too easily and opt for the path of compromise — Africa-for-the world. If you cannot beat them join them, we are told, like the Indian intellectuals have done in appropriating the 'posts', and successfully resituating them as 'Indian' formations. Yet, I think, this too is an oversimplification of Indian scholarship. The flowering of Indian scholarship has been marked in the first instance with a basic concern with local forms of micro-narratives and knowledges. It is this embeddedness in the local conditions and problems of the sub-continent, that has produced the Indian phenomenon in knowledge production — and here I am making specific reference to resident scholars and not the Indians producing knowledge for the global circuit. Indeed, a good number of the subaltern scholars, now part of the global circuit such as Chatterjee and Chakrabarty, started in India as part of the Delhi School of thought.

The most important area in which this pervasive and subordinating influence of globalisation is most pronounced is in the area of knowledge production. What

has become clear is that borrowed global theories travel with ease, in and out of Africa. How then does Africa manage to assert theoretical agency? One of the things that is of concern to me in this essay is the way Africa receives theory from the global world and how theory is inflected locally to speak to African realities and specific history. But how does one realise agency in the area of knowledge production without being consigned into oblivion in the so called globalising world? Put differently, how does one borrow theoretical protocols and still retain a voice? How does one use received theory in a manner that seeks to creatively transform it into an instrument of curving new knowledge rather than a vehicle for dependency? And on this I want to disagree with Foucault that theory is simply an implement for cutting knowledge.⁴ Theory actually frames the way we colonise meaning and spaces we inhabit. It supplies us with the grammar with which to name and decode the world of ideas.

This of course brings us to the vexed question of knowledge and its context of production. It foregrounds concerns with methodological politics and the need to register an awareness of how easily scholarly representations become entrenched. For example, a great deal of 'Unselfconscious — and interested — misreadings of the Third World societies and their values, texts, and practices,' Satya Mohanty has written,

were ... made possible not so much because of overt and explicitly stated racism (although there was a good dose of that in scholarly literature for anyone interested in looking), but primarily because of uncritical application and extension of the very ideas with which the west has defined its enlightenment and its modernity — Reason, Progress, Civilisation. (219)

Mohanty's argument here is that, in their arrogance, the dominant conceptual frameworks from the West have often been used without basic respect for 'the difference between the terms of the dominant framework and those absent or repressed might use for its self-representation' (216). To do so calls upon us to radicalise the difference itself — to recognise that 'the other is not us ... and quite possibly is not even like us' (218). This though is a big challenge because to conceive of the Other outside of our inherited value systems demands also that we do not produce patterns of repression and subjugation similar to those we are seeking to overturn.

In dealing with the above challenge, it is tempting to latch onto what is evidently a relativist thesis as a viable political weapon. The real challenge relates to how one also deals with the indiscriminate and insensitive use of imported theoretical models or simply interprets other cultures through received, but inflexible norms and categories of knowledge. The obvious relativists' response would be that individual elements of a given culture must be interpreted primarily in terms of that culture — in accordance with its system of meaning and values. To be fair, there are clear methodological lessons that one can learn from relativism. For example, the danger of ethno-centrist explanations of other communities and

cultures; the fact that texts (or events or values) can be significantly misunderstood if they are not seen in relation to their particular contexts and more importantly, ‘that interpretation and understanding have historically been tied to political activities, and that “strong” and “meaningful” interpretations have often been acts of discursive domination’ (Mohanty 219). Relativism thus urges us to pay close attention to the specificities of context, and instead of pointing to shared spaces; it foregrounds the differences between and among us.

Although the political lessons of relativism have some persuasive force, they still suffer from what the philosopher, Ernest Gellner (1990), has called excessively charitable intellectual and political attitude underpinned by the complacent assumption that ‘insiderism’ or even cultural and political sympathy with the subject of study will necessarily translate into unassailable insights. What is often ignored by those who are easily persuaded by the relativist position ‘is the existence of institutionally sanctioned power relations between interpreter and the interpreted that determine the politics of meaning in the first instance’ (Gellner 222). What is often forgotten is that for a successful translation to take place, it will have to take into account how power enters into processes of cultural translation and these will include our ‘institutional contexts of interpretation, our “disciplines” and their regimes of truth and scientificity, and the organization of power relations within a global system’ (Gellner 223). This I believe is what Edward Said elaborates on his idea of borrowed theory — especially how theory is inflected by a range of institutional power structures when it travels across different spaces and histories.

In what follows I want to use Said’s ideas to shed light on the dangers of uncontrolled theoretical mobility, regardless of its place of origin, and to show how a certain level of theoretical smugness has tended to plague our reception of theories from the West. I want to use Said’s idea of travelling theory to try to explore what I consider to be the unmediated, almost rampant trafficking of global theoretical protocols. I am interested in the way theories from the dominant cultures of the global world travel into Africa as the sole and crude implements of cutting knowledge on the continent. I will end by drawing attention to how Walter Benjamin’s model of ‘the story teller’ can help us to develop a nuanced grasp of African modernities — a form of local cosmopolitanism.

TRAVELLING THEORY

Edward Said has argued that ideas and theories travel and that this is a fundamental necessity in the development of human society. He writes:

Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. (226)

And yet Said insists that the pattern of travel is neither linear nor without its contradictions and complications. He insists that the movement of theory 'necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalisation different from those at the point of origin', thereby complicating 'any account of transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas' (226). He argues that there is a discernible and recurrent pattern to the movement itself, three or four stages common to the way any theory or idea travels. These are: the point of origin; a passage through the pressure of various contexts as ideas traverse long distances in time and place; the moment of confrontation which makes it possible for the theory to be resisted and tolerated; and the actual transformation of the idea by its new users — assuming a new position in a new time and place (226–27).

In all these stages, Said would seem to suggest that whether we are looking at the emergence or circulation of a theory or idea, it is deeply contextual. It is for this reason that he argues that in 'the writing and interpretation of texts — it is wise to raise the questions of theory and criticism in ways suitable to the situation in which we find ourselves. At the outset this means an historical approach' (230). It means talking about theory in relation to location and time. Because theory arises out of specific historical circumstances, Said calls upon us to reflect on what is likely to happen when, in different circumstances and for new reasons, a given theory is used again and again — its limits, its possibilities, its inherent problems, will be thrown into the open.

Said's point is that a scholar or critic who has 'learned from someone's theory should be able to see the theory's limitations, especially the fact that a breakthrough can become a trap, if it is used uncritically, repetitively, limitlessly' (239). In other words, the moment a given theory gains currency and becomes powerful during its travels, it tends to be codified and institutionalised, turning it into a dogmatic reduction of its original version — a sort of bad infinity (239). It can become overwhelmingly totalising in the manner that Marxist thought became in Africa or more recently, the way postcolonial and postmodern thinking and jargon have come to replace genuine search for knowledge.

The contradiction inherent in theory such as those I have alluded to, is that 'like most theories developed in response to the need for movement and change, [they] run the risk of becoming a theoretical overstatement, a theoretical parody of a situation it was formulated originally to remedy or overcome' (Said 239). I have in mind, for example, the way postcolonial theory has been received quite complacently in certain sites of the academy in Africa. The criticisms levelled against it are now too familiar and are not worth repeating here in their entirety. Ella Shohat (1993) has, for example, noted how little attention has been paid to its a-historical and universalising displacement; its political ambivalence that blurs clear distinctions between colonisers and colonised, hitherto associated with paradigms of 'colonialism', 'neo-colonialism' and third world which it aims to

supplant.⁵ But of great significance for me, is the way it dissolves politics of resistance because it posits no clear domination and calls for no clear opposition, and the way it collapses different histories, temporalities and racial formations into the same universalising category. My concern though is with the way it has led to what I call a demobilisation of intellectual and cultural insurgency and a deletion of the grammar of insurrection and subversive politics. And although I am aware that it can help us to subvert the colonised/coloniser binary, that is, the cultural effects of the transculturation, which characterised the colonising experience and has proved irreversible, its explanatory authority has tended to be exaggerated with a near religious zeal. Hall (1996) argues that postcolonialism like colonialism before it, is about different ways of ‘staging the encounters’ between colonising societies and their others — though not always in the same way or the same degree. It is therefore a descriptive rather than an evaluative term as we have tended to think.

Let us take again the example of Foucault’s reception on the continent, especially his view in *The History of Sexuality* that ‘power is everywhere’ which has gained so much purchase and currency. As Said argues, ‘Foucault’s eagerness not to fall into Marxist economism causes him to obliterate the role of classes, the role of economics, the role of insurgency and rebellion in societies he discusses’ (244). The correlative of this in African scholarship is the disturbing assertion by Achille Mbembe (1992) that the rulers and the ruled are in a ‘convivial tension’ then proceeding to extrapolate this to mean absolute complicity of the ruled in their oppression.⁶ To be sure, there is always compromise in the struggle of life and death between the ruler and the ruled, but it does not signal absolute complicity of the ruled with officialdom, less still equal power relations between the rulers and the ruled because hierarchical and vertical power remains one of the pillars of tyranny on the continent. Nicos Poulantzas has raised the important question: ‘Even if we accept for a moment the view that power is essentially rational, that it is not held by anyone but is strategic, dispositional, effective, that, as *Discipline and Punish* claims, it saturates all areas of society, is it correct to conclude, as Foucault does, that power has exhausted in its use?’ (148). It is precisely this approach that has troubled Foucault’s critics like Charles Taylor who has charged that, in Foucault’s account, ‘there can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime, unless it be that of another. So that liberation in the name of “truth” could only be the substitution of another system of power for this one’ (Taylor qtd in Rouse 104). In Taylor’s view, therefore, Foucault gives us no reason to think that ‘the succeeding system of power will be any better than the present one, and hence no justification for a struggle to change it’ (Taylor qtd in Rouse 104). This is a rather cynical view of the mechanics of power and one wonders where a country like South Africa would be if this kind of view held sway. Post-1994 South Africa may have its short-comings that could be traced to the new political regime, but it is certainly not anything close to the apartheid regime before it. This though is

a symptom of how overblown Foucault's conception of power has become when it travels too far. The trouble is that Foucault's theory has drawn a circle around itself, constituting a unique territory in which Foucault has imprisoned himself and others with him.

WALTER BENJAMIN: THE STORY TELLER

Finally, I want to use Walter Benjamin's idea of the story teller to demonstrate that the development of cultural identities has always been a dialogic one — a project of intimate discourse between local and foreign currents. According to Walter Benjamin, every story teller relies on two major kinds of informers. First is the stay-at-home (autochthon) and second, the traveller (returnee). According to Benjamin, the end result of these primary sources is a dialogue which involves a deep interpenetration of the local and foreign, the micro-narratives rooted in the native lore and tradition on the one hand and foreign traditions (ethnographic blueprint) on the other.

What Benjamin's metaphor of the story-teller does is to draw attention to the power of local popular cultural processes that resist capitalist rationalisation and therefore cannot be admitted into discourses of civilisation except on the basis of dialogue. These are cultural forms that in a Jamesonian language I prefer to call 'cultural unconscious', those cultural experiences that escape the logic of reification and commoditization.⁷ The significance of these cultural experiences lies in the fact that they signal to us that the colonial project was never as final and complete as we tend to think. However much dominant cultures, colonial or otherwise, try to repress these cultural forms because they remind it of its uncompleted project, they nevertheless come to eruption.

The second thing that the metaphor of Benjamin's story-teller does is to force us to confront the utter power of local context, the autochthon, which opens up a whole range of possibilities at that moment of encounter with the foreign; that far from being subjugated or totally erased it enters into a conjugation of identities, often forcing modernity to be seen through the prism of the local. Let me illustrate this by using two of the most exemplary cultural and aesthetic categories inherited from colonialism — the guitar and the game of cricket.

When the acoustic-guitar first appeared among the Luo of Kenya in the late '40s and '50s, it was received with curiosity and admiration. But the challenge was to transform it into a useable and relevant instrument that would carry the weight of the dominant musical genres that were in currency at the time — *bodi* music that was closely associated with the Luo traditional instruments of *Nyatiti* and *ohangla*. It was to these two instruments that Olima Anditi, who is said to have been the first to 'fuse *bodi* and guitar' (Stapleton and May, 233), turned in this novel enterprise that was set to transform the Kenyan musical scene and the rest of East and Central Africa for generations.⁸ Their secret lay in the way they played the guitar, especially the young Charles Juma whose single innovative style of plucking the guitar rather than strumming it revolutionised what has now

come to be called *benga* music. Bosco recalls that ‘This was a new way of playing the guitar, and it resembled the way we pluck our own traditional instruments’ (cited in Stapleton and May 1989 233). D.O. Owino Misiani, the one man who popularised the *benga* music in East Africa, acknowledges that he learned to play the guitar in the way his parents plucked their traditional instruments, the basic rhythm being the *ostinato* motif, which he learned from his mother’s way of playing the *nyatiti* instrument. In this fascinating embrace of cultures born out of distant and different cultural contexts, a new musical sub-genre was born. By the 1980s, it had hit a free Zimbabwe where they decided to call it ‘Kanindo’ after the famous Kenyan producer of *benga* music, Oluoch Kanindo. The point I am trying to demonstrate through this simple example, is how cultures produced on the margins of a dominant discourse might actually have the authority of transforming its basic tenets through an active engagement, largely fuelled from below. This is the significance of Hall’s point referred to earlier on, that:

Face to face with a culture, an economy and a set of histories which seem to be written or inscribed elsewhere, and which are so immense, transmitted from one continent to another with such extra-ordinary speed, the subjects of the local, of the margin, can only come into representation by, as it were, recovering their own hidden histories. They have to try to retell the story from the bottom up, instead of from the top down.
(34–35)

The second example I want to give is that of cricket. Cricket was, as most of us may be aware, ‘considered both in Victorian England and its colonies, to be the perfect expression of the values of bourgeois civility, Anglo-Saxon ethics, and public school morality’ (Gikandi 9). Its symbolic value rested on the fact that it was ‘an exclusively English creation unsullied by oriental or European influences’, further proof of the Victorians’ ‘moral and cultural supremacy’ (Sandiford qtd in Gikandi 9). When the Indians and the West Indies entered the game, it marked a moment of cultural profanity and political triumph. Profanity because the façade of moral and cultural supremacy had been removed, thereby exploding the affinity between cricket and Englishness, between the game and the idea of pure nationhood. It marked a moment of political triumph because as Simon Gikandi has reminded us, the ‘nationalists in India and the Caribbean were to posit their entry into the field of cricket as the mark of both their mastery of culture of Englishness and their transcendence of its exclusive politics’ (11). What is remarkable here is not so much the fact that the postcolonial subjects beat the English at their game, but as Gikandi observes, the ‘radical reinvention of the terms of play. In other words, cricket was no longer thought of as the game that signified the core values of Englishness; it was viewed as the mode of play and ritual that has been redefined by Indian and West Indian players well beyond its original configuration’ (11).

As I reflected on the history of the Caribbean entry into the game of cricket, I was reminded of the outcry that followed the entry of Nkaya Ntini and Paul

Adams⁹ into South Africa's national cricket team, a sport that had become the last bastion of whiteness in South Africa. A typical fear of moral panic was in the airwaves and print media: 'they are lowering the standards in the name of reverse affirmative action; keep politics out of sports'. But the national imperative prevailed and Ntini would soon become a national hero — receiving all forms of accolades. His inclusion, like that of Paul Adams, into the national cricket team was beginning to redefine South African cricket and with it a new future that this fragile nation was groping for. Had the nationalist intervention in sports taken the route of compromise, we would not be talking of transformation in cricket. I use this example of Ntini to illustrate the need for a sustained struggle, even if nationalist, in trying to redefine what a useable Africa should be like for itself and for the world. This is the path that Mudimbe the nationalist signals. He writes:

I believe that the geography of African gnosis ... points out the passion of a subject-object who refuses to vanish. *He or she has gone from the situation in which he or she was perceived as a simple functional object to the freedom of thinking of himself or herself as the starting point of an absolute discourse.* It has also become obvious, even for this subject, that the space interrogated by a series of explorations in African indigenous systems of thought is not a void. (200 [my emphasis])

As shown in the statement above, the nationalist Mudimbe is prepared to interrogate Afrocentrism, without renouncing it. He is aware that any form of enunciation is always positioned in a discourse and a context from where it must speak. But to avoid being trapped in the place from where one speaks one must also signal the desire to crossover — to the point at which the stay-at-home meets the traveller.

My conclusion is that, in order for knowledge production to flower in Africa, the critic's or the scholar's job is to provide resistances to theory, to ideas, especially dominant ones, to open them up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests. The scholar has to point out those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory. Or as Said concludes: 'But unless theory is unanswerable, either through its successes or its failures, to the essential untidiness, the essential unmasterable presence that constitutes a large part of historical and social situation (and this applies equally to theory that derives from somewhere else or theory that is "original"), then theory becomes an ideological trap' (241). This is the path African scholarship must avoid.

NOTES

¹ See also Kenneth King, *Pan-Africanism and Education: A Study of Race, Philanthropy and Education in the Southern States of America and East Africa*. London: Oxford, 1971; Jacob Drachler, *Black Homeland / Black Diaspora: Cross-Currents of the African Relationship*; Kinfe Abraham, *From Race to Class: Links and Parallels in African and Black American Protest Expression*.

- ² I am using the term nationalitarian consciousness after Neil Lazarus to make the distinction between bourgeois nationalism that Frantz Fanon, in the *Wretched of the Earth*, rejected as counter-revolutionary in the decolonisation project and what Lazarus calls insurgent nationalism — a national consciousness that is liberationist and anti-imperialist, but one that also allows the nation to play its part on the stage of history. Certain discourses on nationalism in Africa and on Fanon have tended to conflate these two distinct terms. For further readings on this see Neil Lazarus 1992, 'Disavowing Decolonization' and his recent book, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011).
- ³ See Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, London 1989, p. 68; Simon Frith, 'The Cultural Study of Popular Music', in Grossberg et al., *Cultural Studies*, pp. 180–81; and Wahneema Lubiano, 'But Compared to What?: Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse', for an excellent discussion of the problem of 'authenticity' in Black film.
- ⁴ In supporting Nietzsche's concept of 'effective history', Foucault argues that theory as a form of 'knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting'. See Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, genealogy, history', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 154.
- ⁵ A similar point has been made by Simon Gikandi (2001) in an essay entitled 'Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality', when he cautions contemporary scholars not to lose sight of the historical relationship between old and new forms of globalisation, especially the cultural and political significance of the once powerful idea of the Third World that radically undermined a Eurocentric narrative of development and social change. In his recent book, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Lazarus is even more stringent in drawing the link between the demise of insurgent nationalism to the new grammar of postcolonial theory that has eclipsed discourses on national liberation and the political meaning of the Third World. The Third World, in the view of Gikandi and Lazarus, is no longer the source of cultural and political energies.
- ⁶ See, for example, Achille Mbembe's essay, 'The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarly in the Postcolony'. My interest here is in the way Mbembe oversimplifies the workings of power in Africa by suggesting a narrow and linear complicity of the subaltern classes in their oppression. See a critical challenge to Mbembe's thesis in Tejumola Olaniyan, 'Narrativizing Postcoloniality: Responsibilities'. See also Jeremy Weate, 'Achille Mbembe and the Postcolony: Going beyond the Text'.
- ⁷ See Fredrick Jameson's chapter titled, 'Modernism and Its Repressed; or, Robbe-Grillet as Anti-Colonialist' in *The Ideologies of Theory Essays 1971 – 1981 Volume 1, Situations of Theory*.
- ⁸ Olima Anditi and Charles Juma are regarded in Kenya as the fathers of *benga* music, having fused the traditional Luo *bodi* and Western guitar, and transforming the playing of guitar from strumming to plucking after the Luo traditional style of playing the *Nyatiti* instrument. Both Anditi and Juma dominated the Kenyan music scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s.
- ⁹ Nkaya Ntini (African) and Paul Adams (Indian) were the first blacks to play for the South African national team leading to major protestation from a section of white cricket supporters that cricket standards were being lowered because of the inclusion of these two black players in the national team.

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ASHLEIGH HARRIS

An Awkward Silence: Reflections on Theory and Africa

From Edward Said's early investigation into the politics of how theory travels (1983), to Obioma Nnaemeka's warning that 'theory-making should not be a unidirectional enterprise — always emanating from a specific location and applicable to every location' (362), postcolonial scholarship has always been wary of the circuits that prescribe theory making in a global economy of knowledge. Yet, postcolonial theory has not succeeded in avoiding the trap of articulating itself across these same circuits of knowledge production, particularly when it comes to reading the texts and signs of the continent of Africa. The tools of postcolonial studies' theoretical repertoire have, for the most part, been forged in the academic centres of the West, only encountering African cultural and aesthetic texts via the methodology of application. This reiteration of the appropriation of African cultural and aesthetic objects into a Western frame of interpretation has, I argue, never resolved the Subaltern Studies group's early concern with the problem of intellectual appropriation of the subaltern voice. Instead, theory formation, both in and outside of Africa, has failed to escape this 'unidirectional enterprise'. As Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall proclaim, this has occurred through the conception of African knowledge production as autochthonous, which re-inscribes African knowledge and theory as unique to the geographical borders of the continent, thereby existing outside of the circuits of global knowledge production (Mbembe & Nuttall 348). The essay traces the ways in which both postcolonial studies and theory making in Africa, in their focus on the political imperative to give voice to African selves, have become complicit in this theoretical patterning.

After establishing the problem of this pattern of theory formation and use, the essay considers various investigations into the ethics of letting the other 'be', as opposed to demanding (even in the interests of scholarly 'hospitality') that he/she give an account of him/herself. The true hospitality of learning how to hear and understand African knowledge and theory production (in both the West and in Africa) involves, I argue, a hearing that must, of necessity, unsettle the interrogator. Not because the theory production of Africa is inherently unsettling or different to theory from elsewhere, but because entering the unsettling and ethical space of listening, in philosopher Luce Irigaray's sense, means suspending the belief that as postcolonial scholars we 'know' the places that our scholarship engages. Such an acknowledgement is the crucial first step in accepting that reading and understanding across vastly different and infinitely complex

cultural, geographical, linguistic and epistemic spaces will always involve misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It also suggests that there is no authentic African theory that will convey the massive sign 'Africa' to the world. African theories will, themselves, not fully know Africa.

In deemphasising the question of voice and concomitantly emphasising the ethics of silence (both in being silent to hear the voice of the other and in letting the other's chosen silence be), this essay posits a methodology for theorising in and on Africa that focuses on the suspension of the scholar's claims to expertise and knowledge. In the 'awkward silence' that ensues, I argue, we might find our way through the dilemma of maintaining the political importance of location in how we circulate and consolidate bodies of theory whilst simultaneously refusing an autochthonous location of knowledge in African locations.

THEORY ON/IN AFRICA

At a recent symposium held in Helsinki,¹ Harish Trivedi made an impassioned plea to 'Western scholars' to stop patronising the rich literary traditions in postcolonial nations by spending their time applying trite theoretical concepts wrought in an Anglophone, Western academic global circuit, to texts written (in English) by the postcolonial darlings of the Western academy. The flattening collocation 'Western scholars' notwithstanding, Trivedi's point, more elegantly outlined in 'Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation', warrants reflection: as a global discipline, postcolonial scholarship is in danger of becoming narcissistically self-producing, a loop that, Trivedi argues, actively silences languages, cultural expressions and aesthetics that are not directed towards a Western, Anglophone audience. One may add that the term 'global', when applied to academic disciplines is itself a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, since the provenance and providence of those disciplines remains firmly located in Anglophone universities. These disciplines — for our purpose 'postcolonial studies' — travel, of course, but their travels follow the logic of export, which is to say that they 'arrive' in other parts of the globe as already solid disciplinary objects, pre-organised by the contexts that they have been exported from and resistant to reshaping.

I sympathise with Trivedi's frustration at the ways these so-called global knowledge economies overproduce the value of Anglophone writing² and writers who posit themselves as 'cultural translators' operating *for* a Western (Anglophone) audience. The issue gets to the heart of the impasse that the discipline of postcolonial studies has found itself at for many years: is it possible to articulate a trans-historical, trans-cultural postcolonial theory? If so, how can the critical tools we take from such a theoretical repertoire be used to read aesthetic and cultural texts from postcolonial contexts without reproducing a colonial hierarchy of knowledge?

This is not a new question in postcolonial studies, of course: indeed, as Said warned us, as early as 1983, postcolonial theory (indeed, all cultural theory):

... can quite easily become cultural dogma. Appropriated to schools or institutions, they quickly acquire the status of authority within the cultural group, guild, or affiliative family. Though of course they are to be distinguished from grosser forms of cultural dogma like racism and nationalism, they are insidious in that their original provenance — their history of adversarial, oppositional derivation — dulls the critical consciousness, convincing it that a once insurgent theory is still insurgent, lively, responsive to history. (Said 179)

The perniciousness of this pattern is nowhere more keenly felt than in the ways in which Gayatri Spivak's nuanced and detailed critique in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' has been canonised. The essay is often reduced to the term 'subaltern silence', which once simulacraly detached from Spivak's argument, travels freely. Our frustration with the glib way in which the phrase is often used is redoubled if we return to Spivak's essay and recall her adamant resistance to such recuperations of her own methodology into an imperial logic. With the specific intention to articulate the insurgent position of Subaltern Studies as an intellectual method, Spivak notes the epistemic violence inherent in the making and use of first-world theory (74). She writes that the work of Subaltern Studies must provide 'a radical textual practice of differences' that does not simply reiterate 'the self-diagnosed transparency of the first-world radical intellectual' (80). Critiquing Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault's post-representational theories, she further notes:

The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage. Thus Deleuze makes this remarkable pronouncement: 'A theory is like a box of tools. Nothing to do with the signifier'. (Spivak 69–70)

It leaves us somewhat despondent to see Spivak's essay reduced to the simulacral catchphrase, 'subaltern speech', and placed in just such a theoretical toolbox,³ thereby losing 'its insurgent, lively, responsiveness to history' (Said 179).

Without rehearsing the multiple ongoing debates regarding the epistemic violence of such first-world (Spivak) or Western (Trivedi) analysis, as a starting point this essay accepts the proposition that the tools of interpretation and criticism that constitute postcolonial studies have by and large circumvented African modes of intellectual and theoretical production. That is to say, at the very same time as African studies is vastly represented across the Anglophone academy, we might, along with Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, note the 'overwhelming neglect of *how* the meanings of Africanness are made' (350). This neglect, born I would argue out of an all-too-easy application of theoretical commonplaces to an entire continent, leads to 'dominant imaginings of Africa', and 'routine readings and deciphering of African spaces' (Mbembe & Nuttall 352).

These rote readings of Africa, produced by a methodology in which the continent and its cultural production are ingested into a theoretical model produced 'elsewhere', do not emerge because there is no theory formation in Africa itself but because such readings fail to engage African theory *as* theory.

This is not to say that African spaces and cultural and aesthetic objects can only be interpreted through theories produced in Africa, of course. Indeed, Mbembe and Nuttall's insistence that 'all knowledge is contingent on other knowledges' and, as such, 'we must read Africa in the same terms we read everywhere else' (351) is a premise in this argument, though with one significant revision: I argue that 'the terms' that we use to read everywhere else need interrogation and must themselves enter into a conversation with theorising from, and theory in, Africa.

Nnaemeka addresses one aspect of this dynamic by suggesting that theory formation should inhabit a 'third-space' in Africa that calibrates global (*mondial*) knowledge to and with indigenous knowledge archives (Nnaemeka 376–78). It is worth clarifying what Nnaemeka means by 'third-space'. She writes:

My choice of *space* over *place* or *location* in mapping what I call the *third space* is informed by the distinction Achille Mbembe makes between place and territory in his essay on boundaries, territoriality, and sovereignty in Africa. (377)

For Mbembe,

A place ... is an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies a stability [sic.]. As for a territory, it is fundamentally an intersection of moving bodies. It is defined essentially by the set of movements that take place within it. Seen in this way, it is a set of possibilities that historically situated actors constantly resist or realize.

(qtd in Nnaemeka 377)

Following these theorists' thinking, I take the African continent to exist 'only as a function of circulation and circuits' (Mbembe & Nuttall 351) and, as such, analysable only by way of tracing and understanding those circulations and circuits. This thinking makes it all the more important for us to interrogate the 'uni-directional' character of much postcolonial scholarship on Africa, since that uni-directional (and hence imperial) flow is actively forming the continent's imaginary in the academies of the world.⁴

POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES AND THE STRUCTURE OF SCHOLARLY ADDRESS

The problem of the voice of the subaltern other has dominated postcolonial studies from the early work of the Subaltern Studies group onwards. This concern has developed as a rich tradition of postcolonial inquiry, driven by the ethical and political imperative to dismantle the imperial discursive structures (including those embedded in academic inquiry itself) that silence the subaltern. This imperative clearly follows Spivak's initial injunction that we focus on what the subaltern *cannot* say. Yet, irrespective of the nationality, race, gender or class of the scholar, his/her position vis-à-vis the subaltern is *a priori* one of discursive power: the scholar has the capacity to speak *for* or *on behalf of* the subaltern. The danger inherent in the scholar's appropriation of the subaltern voice is described by Spivak herself, while more recent scholars have reasserted the importance of the political and ethical impulse behind the urge to advocate on behalf of the voiceless (see, for example, Sanders 2002; 2007 and Attridge 2004; 2005). Yet we

can decipher a common structure of address in both of these positions: irrespective of whether the scholar appropriates or advocates on behalf of the subaltern voice, what remains is the structure of the encounter, which I would like to describe as one of hospitality.

The scholar, at home in the academic discourses when he/she is discussing texts that engage the predicament of the subaltern, is — we must agree with Spivak — at a significant discursive remove from the subaltern herself. Yet the gesture to recover the voice of the subaltern, and without which the subaltern remains doomed to silence, is certainly a generous one; it is a gesture of hospitality, of making space in the discursive home, for the foreigner (here, he/she who is absent to the discourse). The gesture of hospitality as structuring a form of address is usefully elaborated via Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality* where he reminds us that despite the fact that the foreigner is 'warmly welcomed ... given asylum, [and] has the right to hospitality' (Derrida 11) that 'foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated' (15). Thus, the foreigner 'has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc.' (Derrida 15). We might add 'the scholar' to Derrida's list, bringing new meaning to his observation that the host 'imposes on [the foreigner] translation into [his] own language, and that's the first act of violence' (15). For Derrida, this violence is 'where the question of hospitality begins' (15).

To put this in the idiom of postcolonial studies, we might say that the hospitable gesture towards the voicing of the subaltern is simultaneously a form of epistemic violence in which the subaltern's voice must be articulated in the registers of the academy (*and* in the languages of the dominant culture, to recall Trivedi's concerns above: this is, after all, also a literal translation). Homi Bhabha tries to address this matter by positing what he terms 'a vernacular cosmopolitanism':

Bear in mind, of course, that the 'vernacular' shares an etymological root with the 'domestic' but adds to it — like the "Un" that turns *heimlich* into *unheimlich* — the process and indeed the performance of translation, the desire to make a dialect: to vernacularize is to 'dialectize' as a process; it is not simply to *be* in a dialogic relation with the native or the domestic, but it is to be on the border, *in between*, introducing the global-cosmopolitan 'action at a distance' into the very grounds — now displaced — of the domestic. (Bhabha 48)⁵

It is interesting to note that Bhabha emphasises the language of 'home' and the 'uncanny/un-homely' (in Freud's sense), thereby highlighting the subversive quality of the vernacular that calls the domestic itself into question. Bhabha not only engages the complexities and complicities of this host/foreigner dynamic, but does so in ways that have sought actively to destabilise the very authority of the host-scholar. To return to Derrida's articulation, we are reminded that the foreigner contests the authority of the host (Derrida 5) at the self-same moment

he/she must respond to the host's initial question, 'Who are you?' in a language not his/her own.

What we see in Bhabha's analysis is a shift in critical focus from the voice of the subaltern other to the language scholars use to negotiate the ethics and politics of representing the subaltern. That is, the foreigner's initial challenge to the authority of the host is prioritised, rather than the foreigner's *right to speech* in the home of his/her host. This becomes particularly pertinent when we take the theoretical language of scholarly analysis as our object of inquiry, rather than the cultural or aesthetic texts that those analyses interpret. I would like to make a similar move, suggesting that when it comes to the question of theory on/in Africa, we might do well to question the discursive claims to authority that theory, produced in circuits that have distinctly circumvented Africa, claim over the sign 'Africa'.

AN AFRICAN ACCOUNT OF THE SELF

For Judith Butler, the question ('Who are you?') addressed to the stranger (to be read in our discussion as that person who is other to the discursive home of cultural theory) demands that the other give an account of him/herself. For Butler the call to the other to give an account of him/herself produces (over and above the symbolic violence pointed out by Derrida) an ethical violence, 'which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same' (Butler 2005 42). Such coherence in our account of ourselves is impossible for two key reasons. First, as Butler points out:

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life, but this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine... The narrative authority of the 'I' must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story. (Butler 2001 26)

The first limit to a coherent account of myself (in any context) then, is that the norms and language (let us say the symbolic codes) by which I represent *myself* do not belong to me and do not match my experience of myself. Secondly, the history of the body that houses this 'self' '... is not fully narratable. To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one's life' (Butler 2005 38).

Now, when the body in question is the African body, discursively written into the thick layers of trauma sedimented by the histories of slavery, colonisation and apartheid, this ethical violence redoubles; becoming political as well as ethical. This is not to say that the host-scholar intends to assert this violence on the African object of his/her analysis. Indeed, one possible reason as to why it remains so difficult to shift these entrenched discursive positions is precisely because the host-scholar is, in the act of 'doing postcolonial theory' most often driven by the good faith to restore the voice of the African *as a human voice*. That is to say, as Derrida reminds us, the foreigner to whom we address the question 'Who are you?' '... is not simply the absolute other, the barbarian, the savage absolutely excluded and heterogenous' (21). The good faith of the host lies in

his/her curiosity to know the foreigner as man or woman, not as savage. The good faith of the scholar-as-host in postcolonial scholarship has been, further, to invite the narrative of the African subject as an act of historical repair. This takes the form of an appeal to the African to write him/herself over the vacant scar left in discourse by the long histories of slavery, colonisation and apartheid, all of which perpetuated, to some extent, the non-humanity of the African other. In its restoration of African subjectivity to the realm of the human (yet still foreign) from the realm of the non-human (barbarian), postcolonial theory might, indeed, be considered to have been a resounding success.

Indeed, one might say that it is all the more important that the African give an account of him/herself as ‘self-same and coherent’ precisely because any incoherence or inconsistency in the narrative of the African self is in danger of being recuperated into racist paradigms of thought that constantly seek to attach terms like dishonesty, irrationality, stupidity to the African subject. The African subject (as guest in the house of theory) must self-present as the rational, coherent human *par excellence*.

It is not only theory from an ‘elsewhere’ that has called African subjectivity to account in this way. As Mbembe points out in ‘African Modes of Self-Writing’, the ‘effort to determine the conditions under which the African subject could attain full selfhood, become self-conscious, and be answerable to no one else’ (2002 240) can be seen to follow two forms of thinking in Africa, both of which fall into the same logic as I have described above. According to Mbembe, the first, ‘Afro-radicalism’, is trapped in a polemic relationship with those three historical moments considered constitutive of African subjectivity: slavery, colonisation and apartheid. That is to say, as a theory of African subjectivity it ‘contradicts and refutes Western definitions of Africa and Africans by pointing out the falsehoods and bad faith they presuppose’ (244). Furthermore, it:

[disqualifies] the West’s fictional representations of Africa and [refutes] its claim to have a monopoly on the expression of the human in general [as a way] to open up a space in which Africans can finally narrate their own fables. This is supposed to be accomplished through the acquisition of a language and a voice that cannot be imitated because they are, in some sense, authentically Africa’s own. (Mbembe 2002 244)

Mbembe’s analysis is that it is under this ‘guise of “speaking in one’s own voice” [that] the figure of the “native” is reiterated’ (245). This introduces the second form of African thinking critiqued by Mbembe: what he calls the ‘prose of nativism’ (Mbembe 2002, 252). It emerges out of the ‘reconquest of the power to narrate one’s own story — and therefore identity — [that seems] to be necessarily constitutive of any subjectivity’ (255) and it establishes ‘a quasi-equivalence ... between race and geography’ (256).

Both African modes of self-writing, however, articulate themselves against, but tragically reproduce, the racist logic of the Enlightenment. Mbembe writes:

According to [the] darker side of the Enlightenment, Africans developed unique conceptions of society, of the world, and of the good that they did not share with other peoples. It so happened that these conceptions in no way manifested the power of invention and universality peculiar to reason. Nor did Africans' representations, lives, works, languages, or actions — including death — obey any rule or law whose meanings they could, on their own authority, conceive or justify. Because of this radical difference, it was deemed legitimate to exclude them, both *de facto* and *de jure*, from the sphere of full and complete human citizenship: they had nothing to contribute to the work of the universal. (2002 246)

Against the epistemic constraints of Enlightenment thinking, and against the determining histories of slavery, colonisation and apartheid, Africans strive 'to know themselves, to recapture their destiny (sovereignty), and to belong to themselves in the world (autonomy)' (242). Yet, the voice claimed reiterates Africa's isolation from the circuits and networks of modernity, since it is one that must reiterate authentic African discourses and authentic African identity, as a narrative of the African — and through metonymic slippage, Africa — as self-same (to return us to Butler's words).

The refusal of these discourses to speak themselves in the language of the Western Enlightenment thus fails and capitulates to those very discourses it seeks to refute. Are these narratives of the self not, after all, still trying to prove the humanity of the African? The Western scholar prompting (or demanding) the speech of the postcolonial other through his/her analysis of that other is not dissimilar to the African seeking unique and authentic articulation of his/herself. Both resist the idea that:

Africa as such exists only on the basis of the text that constructs it as the Other's fiction. This text is then accorded a structuring power, to the point that a self that claims to speak with its own, authentic voice always runs the risk of being condemned to express itself in a pre-established discourse that masks its own, censures it, or forces it to imitate. (Mbembe 2002 257)

To escape this discursive trap, the African might then refuse to speak altogether, but that brings us back to the problem of the subaltern who cannot speak. What is the prognosis, then, in light of this epistemic and representational impasse, for African modes of self-expression, theory and theorising?

The strategy taken by Mbembe and Nuttall in answering this question is 'to constitute an argument that relies less on difference — or even originality — than on a fundamental connection to an elsewhere' (Mbembe & Nuttall 351). It is worth citing Mbembe and Nuttall's stance on this matter in some detail:

Though the work of difference has performed important functions in the scholarly practice that sought to undercut imperial paradigms, it is clearly time, in the case of Africa, to revisit the frontiers of commonality and the potential of sameness-as-worldliness. This is a far cry from a proposition that would aim at rehabilitating facile assumptions about universality and particularity. After all, the unity of the world is nothing but its diversity. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues, 'the world is a multiplicity of

worlds, and its unity is the mutual sharing and exposition of all its worlds — within this world.’ As for the ‘sharing of the world,’ it is, fundamentally, the ‘law of the world.’ (Mbembe & Nuttall 351)

Following this logic for our own purposes, we could say that what Nancy’s insistence that ‘... there is no other meaning than the meaning of circulation’ (Nancy 3) suggests that the question of theory in/on Africa is not a question for Africa alone. Instead, the question should be levelled at scholars everywhere, as Nancy’s statement, ‘...this circulation goes in all directions at once’ (Nancy 3) suggests. More radically, Africa is not a question only for scholars of/in Africa. It is a question for all scholarship, no matter its subject. It is to this notion of ‘sharing the world’ that I now turn in an attempt to describe an ethics that may give us critical leverage in the impasse I have outlined above.

TOWARDS AN AWKWARD SILENCE

If we return to one precise moment in Spivak’s ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, we find a small tear in the fabric of the text that opens a possibility for an ethical account of ‘sharing the world’. Discussing Pierre Macherey’s ‘formula for the interpretation of ideology’, Spivak quotes him thus:

What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation ‘what it refuses to say’, although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. But rather this, what the work *cannot* say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey to silence.

(Macherey 1978 87 qtd in Spivak 81–82)

Spivak’s analysis, as we well know, focuses ultimately on Macherey’s second interpretation of silence (what the text *cannot* say). Yet just as Macherey himself gestures towards the possibility of a new methodology, approaching the matter of what the text *refuses* to say, so too does Spivak comment (briefly) on what this work might involve:

Although the notion ‘what it refuses to say’ might be careless for a literary work, something like a collective ideological refusal can be diagnosed for the codifying legal practice of imperialism... The archival, historiographic, disciplinary-critical and, inevitably, interventionist work involved here is indeed a task of ‘measuring silences’.

(Spivak 82)

This aporia, skipped quickly over in Spivak’s and Macherey’s texts (because of a greater political imperative), indeed opens up a valuable methodological alternative, one that seeks to measure the silences imposed by the (hospitable) request (on behalf of, we could argue, postcolonial theory itself), that the other provide an account of him/herself in the language of the scholar.

On one level, this is precisely the issue Nnaemeka is addressing when she suggests that African theory must modulate its use of theories from elsewhere with the specific cultural terrain of its own spaces. But we might push the matter

further still and suggest that what the African account of the self *refuses* to say may be read *not* as a *measurement* of silence (isn't this, after all, much the same as grappling with what the text cannot say or getting caught in the polemic of the Enlightenment that Mbembe warns us to steer clear of), but rather in letting that silence be.

In its most obvious form, letting the chosen silence of the other 'be' would resist the urge to impose a full and coherent account of subjectivity on African modes of self-writing. Yet surely we cannot afford to let the African self 'be', returned to a silence that reinforces the violence of slavery, colonisation and apartheid? In a world in which the circulation of meaning and theory making is *not* multidirectional we still need a scholarly methodology that will continue to motivate the desire to know about the African experience of history whilst simultaneously acknowledging that that knowledge will never be complete.

In *Sharing the World*, Luce Irigaray interrogates the meanings and values of silence, as a way of forging a new ethics of 'sharing the world'. Her theory starts with the observation that 'possession, subjection, [and] appropriation' have dominated 'monosubjective culture' (Irigaray 4; 2). Thus, for Irigaray, monosubjective culture assumes that the subjectivity of the other is reducible to mine (1). For Irigaray, as for Butler, to reconfigure ethically the relationship with the other requires me to acknowledge that I too am not the self-same. In '[r]ecognizing one's own limits, as well as the [fact that the] existence of the other [is] irreducible to one's own existence' are the first steps towards finding a 'substitute for appropriation' (Irigaray 2).

It is in silence itself that Irigaray posits this new ethics of relationality. She writes:

... silence will no longer be that which has not yet come to language, that which is still lacking words or a sort of ineffability that does not merit interest in language. Silence is the speaking of the threshold. If this silence does not remain present and active, the whole of discourse loses its most important function: communicating and not merely transmitting information. Then dialogue becomes possible. In no dialogue can everything be said, and it is recognizing the necessity of something unspeakable and its preservation that allows an exchange of words between two different subjects.

(Irigaray 5)

Irigaray offers us an account of what the text or narrative of the other might *refuse* to say, without this being reduced to what it *cannot* say. Silence is, thus, not negatively defined (as the failure of language and communication). Irigaray writes, '[relations] between two different subjectivities cannot be set up starting from a shared common meaning, but rather from silence, which each one agrees to respect in order to let the other be' (Irigaray 5).

Irigaray's theory offers us a new approach to the scene of hospitality and its foundational violence of asking the foreigner to account for himself in the language of the host. Irigaray describes the scene of hospitality thus:

We offer to the other that which we unconsciously reserve for ourselves: an enclosed space partly defined around a void... We offer to the other a part of this enclosed

and, in some way, empty, territory — a sort of prison cell, in fact like our own. To be sure, the other will be sheltered, but in an enclosed space, a place already defined by our norms, our rules, our lacks and our voices. The other will have the possibility of dwelling only in a loop of the interlacing of relations where we ourselves are situated by our culture, our language, our surroundings. (Irigaray 23–24)

Thus, as host, ‘... we hardly reach the threshold ... we call to the other ... we invite him, or her, to share our home, without yet leaving a well-known place in order to approach a region that is familiar to us’ (Irigaray 7).⁶ For Irigaray then, true hospitality does not reside in offering space within one’s home for the guest, but in coming to the threshold of the home and meeting the foreigner in a space that is *mutually* unsettling. Therefore, each subjectivity:

has before it a source of words foreign to that in which it dwells —thus not a space opened up by language that is already shared, but a horizon which [sic] opens beyond its limits. (Irigaray 6)

Instead of the structure of address that demands that the foreigner account for himself before the law of the host, this new ethical ideal recommends meeting the other in a threshold place, where the positions of foreigner and host fall away, and in which we allow the silence of the other to ‘be’ (or, in my own phrasing, we allow the other to refuse to account for himself). This is a space that recalls Nnaemeka’s ‘third space’ and Bhabha’s ‘border space’ cited above. For Irigaray, this space is not equivalent to an impossibility of discourse between the two subjects. Rather, she posits a ‘double listening’ between the two strangers, meeting on the threshold, which ‘can prepare the beginnings of a common dwelling’ (Irigaray 14).

This ‘double listening’ is a kind of ‘reciprocal abandon’ (6) of our own positioning within discourse (that is, a coming to the unsettling threshold of our home). The encounter should be a *reciprocal* opening towards the unknown and the strange, rather than a reduction of the other into a nameable object, subject to the law of my home.⁷

Given that I have suggested that the scene of hospitality might be a useful metaphor to understand the problems with theory in its application to the vast continental sign of Africa and its people, what, then, might this reconfiguration of the scene of hospitality bring to the question of postcolonial theory? Instead of suggesting that the non-African scholar must simply avoid writing about African subjects and texts because this is the *authentic* domain, of the African scholar, I would like to reiterate (following Irigaray, Attridge and Sanders) the ethical importance of the curiosity to hear the voice of the other. Yet, if we configure scholarly writing on/in Africa (as we should with all other spaces), as an act of coming to a threshold, as a scholar, I *must*, indeed, am *obliged* to admit my non-knowledge, rather than to perform a complete knowledge of what is posited as a knowable other. Ethics can provide us with a guiding principle in our scholarly pursuits: it requires us to suspend our claims to expertise and knowledge, and to resist the call to the other to give a full and coherent account of himself. It

further requires us to self-reflect critically on our own knowledge paradigms; by entering into the awkward spaces of 'not knowing' we may call into question our knowledge of the world and the tools with which we construct that knowledge. The awkward silences that ensue might prompt real dialogue, respecting both what the other refuses to say and being challenged by entering into the discourse of the foreigner and in listening (albeit partially, incompletely) to what he/she is saying.

This means that knowledge production comes to be a sharing of the world, not in the sense that the world we share is the same (it is not, it can never be), but in the sense that the circuits that create meaning become multidirectional, allowing for participation from all locations and respecting the misunderstandings and confusions that must ensue. If such a dialogue were to structure the address of academic work, we might see a way out of the theoretical impasse we find ourselves in when it comes to 'theory' and 'Africa'. That is to say, theories would circulate through and from Africa, but would make no claim to being autochthonous. Africa would become woven into multidirectional theory-making processes in ways that would be self-evident. At present, this is not the case: the knowledge production industry has by-and-large amputated the entire continent. We think nothing, for example, of an application of Derridean theory to African writing, but using, say, Mbembe's theory to read a novel by a white American male author would require much more complex motivation. African 'theory' in this view of scholarship is only valuable insofar as it contributes to the account of the African self.

In this sense, I would argue, that irrespective of its registers or scope, theory written in Africa or by Africans today is not considered to be theory. This is a profound epistemic and ethical violence that structures contemporary global understandings of knowledge. It also continues the historical violence of slavery, colonisation and apartheid and traps the work we do as scholars in those deeply divisive structures. When any demand is made, specifically of the African, that he/she account for him/herself that demand is historically prescribed in the discourses that make that account a plea for being heard 'as human'. The idea that this act of questioning became one of hospitality, of assuming the humanity of the African, has allowed complacency to enter academic discourse because the act of hospitality is seen as adequate reparation for these violent pasts. Thus, the postcolonial scholar exempts her/himself from shouldering the responsibilities of the slave, colonial and apartheid past, thereby reiterating Deleuze's view, which displeases Spivak so, that theory 'has nothing to do with the signifier'.

What is required is a profound act of self-reflection by the 'global' academy as to how its practices re-inscribe the violence's (symbolic, epistemic, ethical) of those histories that remain constitutive of Africa in the global imaginary. This requires that we open a threshold, in Irigaray's sense, that is deeply self-reflexive and, thus, unsettling. On that threshold we must enter into the awkward silence that may enable a new ethics of theory on/in Africa.

NOTES

- ¹ 'Words and Worlds: Transculturalism, Translation, Identity', Nordic Network for Literary Transculturation Studies. Helsinki, Finland. 26–28th August 2011.
- ² See also Harish Trivedi, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o in conversation'.
- ³ Achille Mbembe's insistence that it is premature to speak of Postcolonial theory, precisely because a sustained and thorough theoretical project has never been consolidated in postcolonial studies, with the result that we have, perhaps, only such a disparate toolbox of critical tools at our disposal in the field, is pertinent. He writes, it is 'an exaggeration to call it a "theory"'. It derives both from anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles on the one hand, and from the heritage of Western philosophy and of the disciplines that constitute the European humanities on the other. It's a fragmented way of thinking...' (Mbembe 2008, 1).
- ⁴ In their ground-breaking *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Aesthetics and Art-making*, Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord challenge methodologies that implicitly reproduce such uni-directional flows of knowledge. The essays collected in their book are exemplary in their redirection of these global flows. Pertinent to my essay is Durrant's own lucid analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as itself part of a broader global tradition of literary modernism, which re-orientates the ways we might have traditionally approached Achebe's perceived realism. Graham Huggan's 'Unsettled Settlers: Postcolonialism, Travelling Theory and the New Migrant Aesthetics' also uses such critical methods to call 'into question the ease with which the experience of migration is accommodated within poststructuralist vocabularies' and considers 'the way in which diverse experiences of migration are homogenized by "travelling" cultural theories' (17). These concerns bear close similarities to my own. There is a great deal more fruitful work to be done in the area of African theory and migratory aesthetics, but it is, unfortunately, beyond the immediate scope of my discussion.
- ⁵ It is worth refracting Bhabha's comments through the prism of Derrida's later reflections on hospitality and cosmopolitanism (see Jacques Derrida *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*), but I do not have the space to do it here.
- ⁶ Irigaray's prose is notoriously awkward, this being her own translation from the French.
- ⁷ Derek Attridge makes a similar point in *The Singularity of Literature* where he suggests that the reader's encounter with a literary work creates the 'possibility not of a new structure of knowledge but of a powerful and repeatable *event* of mental and emotional restructuring' (Attridge 2004, 27). Attridge's argument, though staging many of the ethical steps I am outlining here, hinges on the literariness of the text created in what he calls the 'event' of reading. Thus, while his argument impacts the question of methodology, it does so through the lens of the literary, rather than the theoretical, encounter.

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GRACE A. MUSILA

Submerged Fault Lines: Interests and Complicities in the Julie Ward Case

INTRODUCTION

Julie Ann Ward visited Kenya's Maasai Mara Game Reserve in September 1988 to photograph the annual wildebeest migration from Tanzania's Serengeti National Park into the Maasai Mara. On 6th September 1988 she was reported missing. Six days later, her partly burnt remains were found in the game reserve. Julie Ward's death was a hotly contested matter with various theories about how she had died. Eventually, an inquest revealed that she had been murdered. This finding was followed by a protracted search for her killers, who, at the time of writing, are still at large. Ward's death and the search for her killers is the subject of three books: her father John Ward's *The Animals Are Innocent: The Search for Julie's Killers*; Michael Hiltzik's *A Death in Kenya: The Murder of Julie Ward*; and Jeremy Gavron's *Darkness in Eden: The Murder of Julie Ward*. The one dimension of the Julie Ward death and the subsequent quest for truth that has remained under-scrutinised by the various texts on the matter is the official British involvement in her family's search for the truth and justice. The Kenyan Police's attempts to frame the death as accidental overwhelmingly focused both media and public attention on the Kenyan state actors and their attempt to conceal the truth. By implication, Britain was assumed to naturally support the quest for the truth in the matter. Britain's quiet and non-sensational involvement in the case reinforced this assumption.

In this essay, I attempt to invert this focus on the Kenyan state institutions, by examining the nature of the official British involvement in the search for the truth behind Julie Ward's death. Using John Ward's *The Animals are Innocent*, John le Carré's *The Constant Gardener*, and news articles drawn from Kenyan and British print media, the essay reflects on the configurations of the official British interventions in the case. In his investigations, as documented in *The Animals are Innocent*, Ward approached the matter with rigid assumptions that constructed British institutions and officials as honest, professional and committed to justice, in sharp contrast with Kenyan officialdom's unprofessionalism and lack of integrity. I hope to illustrate that these assumptions — which I term 'bipolar lenses' — though founded on his experiences with Kenyan and British officialdom in the course of his investigations, blinded Ward to the subterranean fault lines of competing interests in the official British involvement in the quest for his daughter's killers. By reading Ward's account of the quest for his daughter's killers alongside a

fictional account of a similar quest in le Carre's novel *The Constant Gardener*, and the subsequent revelation of British complicity in the cover-up of the truth behind Julie Ward's death, I hope to illustrate that contrary to Ward's belief, and indeed, popular wisdom about British moral integrity and commitment to justice as opposed to the failings of the Kenyan officialdom, there were underlying fault lines which suggest continuities and complicities between Kenya and Britain in the cover-up. These fault lines bring the subterranean contradictions embedded in Ward's bipolar lenses to the surface. They also question the notion of the unity of the subject, in the unstated assumption that Britain was a monolithic entity bound by the same ethical codes, moralities and uncompromising desire for justice. Against this background, the essay hopes to show that these binary assumptions — often articulated through notions of Europe's commitment to justice and human-rights in contrast to postcolonial African states' abuse of these¹ — work to mask the intersections between the two, marked by complicities and continuities largely mediated by the interests of capital which fracture the myth of Europe's moral authority sanctioned by a value-neutral progress through modernity.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF BIPOLAR LENSES IN JOHN WARD'S *THE ANIMALS ARE INNOCENT*

Ward's personal account in *The Animals are Innocent: The Search for Julie's Killers* constructs a set of bipolar lenses, which sharply polarise Kenyan and British state institutions. Ward's narrative begins with certain assumptions which he propagates throughout the book.

In his preface to the book, Ward says that many people have asked why he wrote it. In response, he explains that firstly he 'wanted the true story of Julie and her terrible murder to be recorded', because in the aftermath, the truth 'has been enveloped in lies and corruption' (Ward xix). His second reason for writing the book is the hope that 'it will act as a warning'. As he writes:

Kenya is a dangerous place. I am continually contacted by distraught and angry relatives of tourists who have been murdered, attacked, robbed or have completely disappeared... 'Why didn't someone warn us it was dangerous? And why can't we get any information from the Kenyans about what happened?'... If something goes wrong — you're on your own. The Kenyans complain, 'why pick on us? Tourists sometimes get murdered in New York or London'. This is true but the difference is that in those cities, the authorities will not try to sweep the murder under the carpet. (xix-xx)

Ward's dislike of Kenya is evident from his preface, which provides a fitting introductory frame to his polarisation of the Kenyan cover-up against what he sees as British commitment to truth and justice. At the time of writing this, Ward was convinced that the attempt to 'sweep the murder under the carpet' was a Kenyan affair in its entirety. This polarity recurs throughout the book.

While the subject of the book — the grisly murder of the author's young daughter — would provoke strong anger and resentment in anyone, Ward tells us that his dislike for Kenya develops on his very first visit to the country before he learns about her tragic death. Ward describes his first encounter of the continent thus:

Africa, Africa, Africa. I believe that if I were to be blindfolded and deposited anywhere on this earth, I'd know instantly if I were in Africa. The sounds, smells, the 'feel' of the continent that bombard the senses trigger in me a wary unease and, as always, I'd want to leave again as soon as possible. I don't like being in Africa. So much is beyond my understanding. I'm sure this sensation of foreboding is not induced entirely by my experiences. (45)

On his first visit to Kenya, Ward collapses the entire continent under a homogeneous blanket of smells, sounds and opaqueness which make him uneasy. In underlining that this 'sensation of foreboding' was not induced by his experiences, Ward appears to ascribe an inherent perilous status to the continent which, as a first-time visitor, he intuitively senses, and the subsequent discovery that his daughter has been brutally murdered merely confirms it. In this, Ward draws on the semantic grammars of preconceived ideas about the strangeness of Africa and its opaqueness to the familiar, normative 'rational' tools of knowing/understanding a place available to a non-African.

The subsequent tragedy of his daughter's death and the discovery of her mutilated, burnt remains inevitably hatch a bitter hatred and anger in Ward. Beyond this, however, it is the official attempts to pass off the death as suicide or an attack by wild animals that seals his hatred for the country (88). In the ensuing drama of alterations on the autopsy report and the Police Commissioner's reluctance to open a murder inquiry, Ward's distrust for Kenyans and Kenyan state institutions deepens further. It is no wonder that on subsequent visits to Kenya, he always looks forward to his departure, and always 'feels a sense of total relief when the [aircraft] door is closed and Kenya is shut outside' (93).

On his first visit to Kenya, when his daughter is missing, Ward contrasts the seeming Kenyan police disinterest with the typical British police's response:

I was only used to an English environment. If a young woman was missing in Hyde Park, in the centre of London for just one night, two hundred policemen would be out searching the park and every other copper in the land would be keeping his eyes open. Yet here in Nairobi, I was being told that it was a real achievement to get any police officer to even take the matter seriously. (52)

Such comparisons recur throughout the book, and increasingly Ward's distrust for Kenyans leads him to seek professional opinions from predominantly Britain and the British diplomatic corps in Nairobi in the course of his investigations.

In Kenya, Ward interacts closely with the officials at the British High Commission, including among them Jenny Jenkins and John Ferguson. The two are particularly helpful with logistics, contacts, processing paperwork and general support at various stages of the investigations. Jenkins and Ferguson are also actively involved in Ward's investigations and Ferguson often accompanies him to meetings with Kenyan state actors, including the Police Commissioner and the government pathologists. In the process, Ward develops great trust and respect for the officials at the British High Commission who provide an indispensable support base for him in Kenya, where he was a stranger, grieving his daughter's

brutal death and faced with official attempts to derail his quest for justice. It is in gratitude for this support that Ward writes approvingly of the Commission:

So many times I have read newspaper reports where Britons abroad have complained of the service, or lack of it, that they received from our Embassy or High Commission. But I could not have wished for better assistance than that which I have received from the consular staff in Nairobi. I have had nothing but good advice and solid support.
(102)

Ward has similar sentiments about the Foreign Office:

In 1988 the Kenya desk in the Consular section at the Foreign Office was run by a young man named Nigel Wicks. He was very sincere and endlessly helpful and while he ran the Kenya desk, I was always kept fully briefed of any developments. Like Jenny Jenkins in Nairobi [British High Commission], [he] always offered help. (96)

Despite these glowing tributes to the two British institutions, there were slight hiccups in Ward's relationships with them. Two incidents stand out in this regard. For days after his daughter's remains are found the Kenyan Commissioner of Police, Phillip Kilonzo, refuses to acknowledge that they are looking at a case of murder. During this period, Kilonzo is often quoted in the media insinuating that Julie Ward's death is a case of misadventure, as opposed to murder. Suspicious of this misrepresentation of the case — coming soon after the altered autopsy report — Ward decides to hold a press conference in Nairobi and set the record straight. Before the press conference, Ward writes:

[Jenny Jenkins] informed us that while the British High Commission had considerable doubts [about the Kenyan police], the line they advocated for that morning was to support the Kenyan police... At about 10.55 a.m. John [Ferguson] rushed in. 'I've just had a phone conversation with Kilonzo, who now says that the whole matter of the press conference is unfortunate. He insists that no mention be made of the possibility of murder, foul play or a murder inquiry. Also, he doesn't want any details of the post-mortem report released to the press... I must ask you to abide by his request for this morning. (111)

It is puzzling that the High Commission asks Ward to abide by the Kenyan police's instructions, with full knowledge that the Kenyan police were hardly taking the case seriously, and that they seemed bent on presenting Julie Ward's death as an accident. However, Ward explains this away by observing that 'whilst the Consular section were supportive, there were other sections more concerned with avoiding a diplomatic incident — people whose job it was to try to prevent anyone from "rocking the boat"' (111). Persuasive as this rationalisation is, Ward's failing here is in not subjecting these anxieties about 'rocking the boat' to close scrutiny.

In the second instance, when the Kenyan police finally decide to set up an inquest into Julie Ward's death — a seemingly unnecessary step given the overwhelming evidence of murder — a Foreign Office representative, David Muat phones Ward and delivers this news, further indicating that the family has two options:

The matter could be left to the Kenyan police to give evidence, entirely at their discretion. The other alternative was for my family to be legally represented, produce the evidence we had gathered and support that evidence with witnesses. The recommendation of the Foreign Office was that the former course be adopted and the submission of evidence should be left to the Kenyan police... I couldn't believe my ears! Knowing the record of the Kenya police over the last seven months, here was Muat telling me that the official Foreign Office recommendation was we should leave it all to the police. (229)

As Ward rightly points out, this is a bizarre recommendation, in light of the Foreign Office's full knowledge of the Kenyan police's evident commitment to a verdict of misadventure and the post-mortem report, which appeared to have been altered to validate this position. In this instance, Ward rejects the Foreign Office's recommendation and to ensure that there is no confusion about his decision, he writes a letter to the Foreign Office and confirms that his family would be legally represented. Despite this curious incident, Ward immediately goes to the Foreign Office's defence once again:

All this must give the impression that my relations with the Foreign Office were at a low ebb. Generally this was not the case. While there was an attempt to influence events, to limit diplomatic damage, once such schemes were firmly rejected... the majority at the FO extended such solid unwavering support, which was gratefully accepted. It would, indeed, have been a difficult battle in Nairobi, without the help of the British High Commission — and their instructions come from London. (230)

For a long time, Ward remains convinced that his quest for his daughter's killers has the blessings of the British High Commission and the Foreign Office. Whenever the two appear to err towards the Kenyan police's preferred approaches to the matter, Ward excuses it as typical but harmless diplomatic caution.

Although increasingly frustrated by the Kenya Police's seeming disinterest in the case, Ward nonetheless continues to nurse the belief that the British High Commission is on his side on the matter. He attempts to persuade the then British High Commissioner to Kenya to exert diplomatic pressure on whoever is behind the attempted cover-up:

I suggested to Sir John [Johnson, Ambassador], that it could save a great deal of embarrassment all round if someone high up in Kenya's government could tell [Police Commissioner] Kilonzo to abandon the cover-up and arrest and charge the killers. I believed that as Kenya's chief of police and chief government pathologist were involved, the required instruction would have to come from someone much higher up... I considered it would need the president to get involved. I therefore asked Sir John if he would assist in this area. As British High Commissioner, he obviously had many contacts at high level in the Kenyan government. However, Sir John considered my 'private approach' was better as any official contact might cause the Kenyans to 'put up the shutters'. (202)

Ward expects that official British pressure would force the Kenyans to stop the cover up. In this, Ward assumes that Britain as the mother country, retained

significant control over Kenya. Most importantly, he is convinced about British commitment to justice.

It is against this background that Ward feels Police Commissioner Kilonzo is embarrassed when confronted about the attempted cover-up in the presence of John Ferguson, a diplomat. As he writes:

Kilonzo was clearly furious at the cover-up being so obviously exposed. I knew though, that the main cause of his embarrassment was not Frank [Ribeiro, his friend] or me, but John Ferguson. Because, with John present, the British Government 'knew'. (206)

Ignoring the patronising undertones Ward's portrayal of Kilonzo as a child who has been 'caught out' as it were, by a representative of Her Majesty's government, the cover-up is represented as an entirely Kenyan affair and Britain is presumed to be as scandalized as he is. This view is built on his conviction that the British diplomatic corps officially feels as strongly as he does about his daughter's death, the attempted cover-up and his quest for truth and justice. While indeed certain individuals — including Johnson, Wicks, Ferguson and Jenkins — may share his anger and passionate quest for justice, Ward's assumption that this is the official line may be too trusting. So too, it would appear, is his belief that the Kenyans are on their own in the cover-up and that they may be pressured into promoting the course of justice by the British.

On the whole, Ward's narrative illustrates his construction of a binary lens through which he reads Kenyan and British state institutions. Ward's resentment and distrust of Kenya and Kenyan official institutions is balanced against his faith in the British officials and institutions. For instance, he dismisses the investigating officer in charge of the case, Inspector Wanjau, while retaining great respect for the two Scotland Yard detectives sent to Kenya to investigate the murder.

In this polarised attitude, Ward once again illustrates his positioning in a broader architecture of ideas, which associates Europe with modernity, efficient state institutions and strong senses of integrity, ethics and justice. These ideas echo what Anne McClintock terms the 'metaphysical Manicheism of the imperial enlightenment' (15). It is from this national moral high ground for instance, that in a confrontation with Dr. Kaviti for altering the post-mortem report, Ward angrily informs him: 'In England you would be struck off the medical register for doing what you have done. Don't you know it is a serious offence to falsify an official document?' (Ward 119). This outburst captures Ward's conviction about the ethical and moral integrity of British state institutions.

FICTIVE IMAGINARIES: UNMASKING BRITISH INTERESTS IN THE CONSTANT GARDENER

In some ways, John le Carre's novel, *The Constant Gardener*, published a decade after Ward's book, offers interesting insights into other possibilities which Ward may have overlooked in his interactions with the Kenyan and British official institutions, and which he was later to become aware of. Indeed, when read side-by-side with Ward's narrative, the novel qualifies three important issues in Ward's

narrative: the essentialised polarity between Kenya and Britain; British diplomatic concerns about the case as purely routine, innocent caution; and broadly, the myth of British moral authority.

Le Carre's *The Constant Gardener* is a fictional narrative set in the 1990s during the Moi regime, which is marked by what a character in the novel describes as 'terminal government corruption, a breakdown in public infrastructure and police brutality' (52). The novel, largely set in Kenya, tells the story of the murder of a young diplomat's wife, Tessa Quayle. After the murder and disposal of her body in a deserted spot by the shores of Lake Turkana in Northern Kenya, the British High Commission in Nairobi attempts to frame her close African friend Dr. Arnold Bluhm for the murder. However her husband, Justin Quayle, launches a private investigation, and in the process, retraces his wife's footsteps, discovering that she may have been killed because she had put together a report about the fatal use of poor Kenyan TB patients for trials of a new TB drug, Dypraxa, by a British multi-national corporation, the House of Three Bees. Tessa attempts to pressure the British High Commission and the Foreign Office into stopping the company from continuing these drug trials and doctoring inconvenient findings in the interests of fast-tracking the trials in order to introduce the drug to the market before their competitors develop similar drugs. All along, the novel reveals, the British government is complicit in the doctored drug trials, Tessa's murder and subsequently, Justin's murder.

Although this is a fictional narrative, within its fictional truths are a range of important insights which, when read beside the Julie Ward narrative, shed important light on the above outlined perception of the British official institutions' support for the Ward family's quest for the truth. In the novel, Tessa Quayle, the wife of diplomat Justin Quayle, prepares a detailed report in which she outlines details of the human rights abuses, corruption and the use of violence by the Moi government, and submits this to Sandy Woodrow, Head of Chancery at the British High Commission in Nairobi. When she asks why the High Commission does nothing about the report, Woodrow retorts:

Because we are diplomats and not policemen, Tessa. The Moi government is terminally corrupt, you tell me. I never doubted it... Ministers are diverting lorry-loads of food aid and medical supplies earmarked for starving refugees. Of course they are... The police routinely mishandle anybody unwise enough to bring these matters to public attention. Also true. You have studied their methods. They use water torture, you say. They soak people, then beat them, which reduces visible marks. You are right. They do... The High Commission shares your disgust, but we still do not protest. Why not? Because we are here, mercifully, to represent our country, not theirs. We have thirty-five thousand indigenous Britons in Kenya whose precarious livelihood depends on President Moi's whim. (52)

Woodrow's response here provides an interesting qualifier to both the notion of British power over Kenya and the myth of its commitment to human rights protection. For Woodrow, Britain's position in Kenya is a delicate one in which

they have to be careful not to upset the host nation as this would put the welfare of the expatriate community at risk.

This fictional portrait of Britain's compromising position on Kenya is confirmed by its involvement in Kenya's quest for democracy during the Moi regime. In an essay on the role of foreign donors in Kenya's democratic transition, Stephen Brown observes that despite the perception that donors were instrumental in facilitating the country's transition to democracy² by encouraging opposition parties and enforcing donor conditionality, they played a 'second, less publicized role' (2001 725). After opposition parties were legalised, donors consistently:

Discouraged any measures that could have led to more comprehensive democratization [by] knowingly endorsing unfair elections (including suppressing evidence of their illegitimacy) and subverting domestic efforts to secure far-reaching reforms. In the face of anti-regime popular mobilization, donors' primary concerns appeared to be the avoidance of any path that could lead to a breakdown of the political and economic order, even if this meant legitimizing and prolonging the regime's authoritarian rule.

(Brown 2001 726)³

Brown considers Kenya's strategic and economic importance to Western countries as the key reason behind their reluctance to compromise their relationship with the Moi government. As he points out, the United Kingdom for instance 'values close ties with Kenya rooted in colonial history and strong financial and commercial relations' (2003 82). Further 'donors use their generally friendly relationship with Kenya to further other foreign policy goals in the region' (2003 83). Le Carre's fictional character, Sandy Woodrow, sums up this position in his response to Tessa's questioning of the British High Commission's disinterest in the Kenyan Government's corruption and human rights abuses: 'The High Commission shares your disgust, but we still do not protest. Why not? Because we are here, mercifully, to represent *our* country, not *theirs*' (le Carre 53 [emphasis in original]). Woodrow's response to a certain degree echoes Ward's justifications about the delicate position that the British diplomats in Kenya found themselves in. Ward writes: 'I am aware of an element in the Foreign Office, whose only function is to ensure the status quo is maintained between the UK and other countries, including Kenya. Probably there are very sound political or commercial reasons for their activities' (211–12).

While both Woodrow and Ward's arguments here would justify an abstemious attitude towards local politics in the spirit of non-interference, they do not explain active involvement in such activities. In reality, the notion of quiet diplomacy would seem to be a useful discursive mask behind which Britain hides its interests and the contradictions underpinning the macro-discourses it progresses in the Third World, (chiefly democracy and human rights). In reality, Britain's economic and political interests in these countries actually undermine and cast doubts on its commitment to these progressive discourses.

In *The Constant Gardener*, Tessa is murdered to end her interference with the activities of a huge multinational company, House of Three Bees, owned by a Nairobi-based British businessman, Sir Kenny Curtiss.

‘Three Bees. Quite an amazing outfit. Finger in every African pie but British to the core. Hotels, travel agencies, newspapers, security companies, banks, extractors of gold, coal and copper, importers of cars, boats. Plus a fine range of drugs. [...]. And they’re hugger-mugger with Moi’s Boys too’. (le Carre 114)

Three Bees’ economic interests not only serve the interests of the British government, but also, their investments are sustained by a patronage relationship with the Kenyan government, which compromises Britain’s ability to question the Kenyan government’s misdeeds. Further, for Britain Three Bees’ new merger with a large Swedish pharmaceutical company, Karel-Vita-Hudson (KVH), not only means bigger profits for Three Bees, but also, KVH has offered to build a pharmaceutical factory in an economically depressed region in Britain.

The novel’s portrayal of a deeply intermeshed relationship between commercial interests, British diplomatic Foreign Service and the British Secret Intelligence Service provides a fascinating multi-dimensional view, to qualify Ward’s one dimensional portrait of British moral integrity and commitment to justice. The novel reveals a symbiotic relationship between the intelligence unit and business, in this case through Sir Curtiss and the Nairobi office of the Secret Service, housed in the High Commission. This relationship is deeply layered and complicit, as the Secret Service not only uses Curtiss to help do their dirty work, including supplying arms to war-torn Sierra Leone in exchange for political protection (le Carre 414) which in turn assures his business’ success, and feeds British economic growth; but he also gives cash handouts to British political parties and classified intelligence to the Secret Service. As he reminds Tim Donohue of the Secret Service’s Nairobi office:

‘I’m *Sir* fucking *Kenneth* Curtiss! I have subscribed — last year alone — half a fucking *million* quid to party funds. I have provided *you* — British fucking Intelligence — with nuggets of pure gold. I have performed *voluntarily*, certain services for you of a very, very tricky sort’. (le Carre 409 [emphasis in original])

Although the novel insists on its fictiveness, the narrative nonetheless gives interesting insights into the symbiotic relationships between British politics, commercial interests and its foreign missions. What is important here is not so much whether this reflects the reality or not, but the possibility — even in fictional imaginaries — of the fault lines that fissure Britain’s mythical mantle of virtue and uncompromising moral integrity.

These fictional portraits shed interesting light on the Ward quest for truth and the British officialdom’s involvement in the process. An interesting coincidence is the novel’s use of the notion of ensuring that nobody ‘rocks the boat’, which Ward uses in his book. Ward’s comment about ‘people whose job it was to try to prevent anyone from “rocking the boat”’ (Ward 111), gains suggestive meanings when

read beside similar sentiments expressed in le Carre's novel by two Scotland Yard detectives — Rob and Lesley — who are sent out to Kenya to help investigate Tessa Quayle's murder. As they tell Justin Quayle in confidence, soon after being pulled off the case for getting too close to the truth:

The glorious House of Three Bees is never to be mentioned again and that's an order. Not their products, their operations or their staff. Nothing's allowed to rock the boat. Lots of boats.... Curtiss is untouchable. He's halfway to brokering a bumper British arms deal with the Somalis. The embargo's a nuisance but he's found ways of getting around it. He's a front-runner in the race to provide a state-of-the-art East African telecom system using British high-tech. (le Carre 217)

Although Ward seems to take the notion of not 'rocking the boat' to be an innocent preservation of diplomatic relations between the two countries, le Carre's novel suggests that the concerns may be less innocent than Ward takes them to be.

The novel presents the Foreign Office, the British High Commission and Scotland Yard as all caught up in these complicities and power games, even though a few individual members remain upright, and act with integrity. A case in point here is the British High Commissioner, Sir Porter Coleridge. Soon after Tessa Quayle's death, the High Commissioner receives instructions from the Foreign Office in London to cover it up:

'The shit [Foreign Office Director of Affairs for Africa] Pellegrin says, shove the whole thing under the carpet' Porter Coleridge announced, slamming down the telephone. 'Shove it far and fast. Biggest bloody carpet we can find... Off the record and only if asked, we respected her crusades but considered them under-informed and screwball'. A pause while he wrestled with his self-disgust. 'And we are to put it out that she was crazy... The [Foreign] Office wants long-suffering. She was our cross but we bore her bravely. Can you do long-suffering? It makes me absolutely fucking *sick*'.

(le Carre 70–71 [emphasis in original])

Here, the Foreign Office orders the British High Commissioner to completely cover-up Tessa Quayle's murder. Coleridge's failure to toe the official line is punished by a sudden removal from his post in Nairobi, when he is considered a threat to the web of political lies intended to discredit both Tessa and her cutting report on British complicity. The official story put out to the staff at the High Commission is that on the spur of the moment the High Commissioner has decided to take some home leave and find his disabled daughter Rosie a special school in Britain (le Carre 301).

A similar scenario plays out in the Scotland Yard where, soon after Tessa's death, two young detectives, Rob and Lesley, are sent to Kenya to investigate. The two piece together evidence of British involvement in Tessa's death and submit a detailed report to the Scotland Yard, with recommendations about the involvement of key figures. In response, their Scotland Yard boss rejects their report, pulls them off the case and appoints two new detectives, under strict instructions on the bounds of their investigations. As they inform Justin — now their ally:

‘[We] are off the case. Gridley has sent two new officers to Nairobi to help and advise the local police in the search for [Tessa’s close friend Arnold] Bluhm. No looking under stones, no deviations. Period... And our replacements aren’t allowed to talk to us in case they catch our disease’. (le Carre 216)

Rob and Lesley are angered by the realisation that there is a high-level cover-up in the case, and that the very institutions they have worked for with loyalty and a strong sense of integrity, are morally bankrupt, driven by pure greed, endorsed by state apparatuses, including the High Commission, the Foreign Office, the Secret Intelligence Service, the national political parties and the Scotland Yard, all of which present a front of commitment to justice and integrity. Rob and Lesley find themselves unmasking the depths of lies and complicities, which Tessa had earlier unmasked, when she observed: ‘The mother of democracies is once more revealed as a lying hypocrite, preaching liberty and human rights for all, except where she hopes to make a quick buck’ (le Carre 53).

Tessa’s observation here — and indeed the entire novel’s portrayal of the layered interests that underpin the Kenya-Britain relationship — suggests interesting insights for the Ward case. Even as a fictional text, the novel powerfully dismantles John Ward’s assumptions, all of which are anchored on the dichotomy of an inherent British commitment to justice, truth and moral integrity as contrasted with Kenya’s lack of these values. Although the novel confirms Ward’s experiences in so far as the existence of some upright wo/men of integrity like Nigel Wicks, John Ferguson and Jenny Jenkins are concerned, these people’s commitment to justice, the novel suggests, remains constrained by the broader institutional structures under which they work, and which dictate the limits of their interventions, as illustrated by le Carre’s fictional Justin Quayle, Rob, Lesley and Porter Coleridge, all of whose efforts to counter the system are clipped.

But perhaps the most interesting oversight in Ward’s assumptions which the novel eloquently articulates, is the power of capital and its interests. In the novel, it is capital that mediates the subterranean fault lines in the Kenya–Britain relationship. The novel suggests that faced with the interests of capital, the moral integrity and commitment to justice which Ward associates with British institutions melts down. Consequently, the artificial moral distinction between the colonies and the mother-country fizzles out as the two work in partnership towards capital accumulation, and the mother country finds itself deploying the very strategies it publicly condemns in the post-colonial African state through its discursive mask of the promotion of justice and democracy.

BEHIND THE SCENES: THE FOREIGN OFFICE, THE SECRET INTELLIGENCE SERVICE AND THE BRITISH HIGH COMMISSION IN KENYA

Although the author underlines the fictiveness of the entire narrative, le Carre’s *The Constant Gardener* nonetheless displays two striking allusions to real events: pharmaceutical scandals in Africa⁴ and the death of Julie Ward in Kenya. Though fictional, and making no overt reference to Julie Ward or her death, the narrative

in *The Constant Gardener* is grafted into a familiar Kenyan topography, with the Julie Ward case as the closest referent. Indeed, in the opening pages, the novel alludes to ‘the sensational case of a young English woman who had been hacked to pieces in the African bush ten years ago’ (le Carre 11) — an allusion that can be read as a fictional nod to the Julie Ward case. The narrative in *The Constant Gardener*, gains instructive relevance when read beside the subsequent revelations about the alleged British involvement in the cover up of the Julie Ward death.

Looking at the ever-helpful staff at the British High Commission in Nairobi, one would argue, as Ward was wont to, that he had official British support in his search for answers in the mystery of his daughter’s death. To a certain degree though, Ward’s trust grew into an unquestioning faith and even defence of the British High Commission’s codes of diplomacy, in ways that may have blinded him to certain nuances of competing British interests in the matter. One particular incident which Ward narrates in his book stands out in this regard. Two weeks after his daughter’s remains are found Ward goes to the British High Commission in Nairobi, accompanied by his friend and business partner Frank Ribeiro:

At the High Commission we told John Ferguson and Jenny Jenkins about the chance meeting with Shaker and as always, John made meticulous notes for the consular records. At one point, I was asked to go to another room, leaving Frank [Ribeiro] behind with Jenny. On the way, a request was made to which I agreed. I was to meet a man who had very good contacts at the highest level with the Kenyan police. I was to meet him on the understanding that his name was never disclosed for fear of jeopardizing his position... He told us that the latest suggestion being put about by the Kenyan police was that Julie had been struck by lightning.

‘They can’t be serious. Surely they don’t think I’m going to buy that, do they?’

‘A lightning strike can cause an injury with the appearance of a cut,’ he said. ‘In my career, I’ve seen injuries like that and, of course, it would explain the burning.’

His attempt to justify this ludicrous theory immediately rang warning bells with me. He affected to be there to help us but I formed the impression that his real assignment was to deliver a message. He seemed to be trying to sound me out, to see if I’d accept any different theory other than murder. I wondered who this man really worked for... I satisfied myself that the Kenyans paid his salary. Whether anyone else did too, I never bothered to find out. (Ward 133)

This curious incident should have merited closer scrutiny. But Ward completely brushes it aside.

The relevance of this incident dawns on Ward over a decade later at the second inquest into his daughter’s death, held at Ipswich, England, in April 2004. During the inquest, an agent attached to the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) testifies that he had met and discussed the Julie Ward death with David Rowe, a former Kenyan Assistant Police Commissioner who was his contact and a covert surveillance expert days after the discovery of Julie Ward’s remains. Both Rowe and the SIS agent, [code-named Mr. A] had earlier denied having met and discussed the Julie Ward case, and only admit this after the Independent Police

Complaints Commission discovers a record of Mr. A's meeting with David Rowe at the Secret Intelligence Services offices in London. In the record, Mr. A had logged that Rowe briefed him about the Julie Ward case. Later Mr. A admits that he paid the Commissioner of Police, Phillip Kilonzo, a courtesy call soon after Julie Ward's death. Further, he admits that he was:

Asked by the High Commission to bring in Mr. Rowe, whom he knew well socially, and who was partly paid by the British government. He [Rowe] provided information about the Kenyan Police force... Four days after their meeting, Mr. Rowe tried to persuade Ward that his daughter was struck by lightning. (Barkham 2004)

These two incidents represent what I term the 'invisible' face of the official British interventions in the case. These were the behind-the-scenes activities of officials affiliated with the High Commission. A few issues stand out for me in this series of events: firstly, that the SIS agent in question holds a meeting with the Kenyan Commissioner of Police, Phillip Kilonzo, a few days after the Julie Ward's remains are found. Secondly, that soon after, SIS tasks Rowe with securing John Ward's buy-in to the theory of lightening, which closely approximates the Kenyan police's theories of accidental death. Third, and most importantly, this meeting is facilitated by the British High Commission, takes place in its offices, and comes just before a meeting with the ambassador John Johnson and immediately after a meeting with John Ferguson and Jenny Jenkins.

In hindsight, I begin to see why the British High Commission appeared to be pushing the Kenyan police's preferences on John Ward. Most importantly, I understand why Britain completely abstained from exerting pressure on the Kenyans in the Ward matter, preferring to remain officially non-committal when other governments were outspoken about it. From the above incidents, contrary to Ward's belief that the cover up was an exclusively Kenyan affair, the British Secret Intelligence Service would seem to have been complicit in the Kenyan police's preferred 'truths' in the case as suggested by Mr. A's involvement in the matter.

These two incidents provide interesting perspectives, especially when read beside the fictional portrait of the Foreign Office and the British High Commission in *The Constant Gardener*. The novel becomes an interesting reference point also, when read from the perspective of the conventions of documentary realism. Sauerberg defines documentary realism as 'a narrative mode which, while adhering in principle to the time-honoured narrative conventions of realistic narrative, draws on verifiable reality to various extents, but invariably in such a way as to call attention explicitly or implicitly to the difference between the fictional and the factual' (Sauerberg 6). According to her, documentary realism includes isolated reference to a factual phenomenon which works through the double-reference technique. This double-reference typically manifests itself 'either as integration of more or less obviously factual material in the form of quotations or references into the narrative's otherwise quite fictitious universe, or as the adaptation of a wholly factual series of events to a traditionally fictional narrative

pattern, and sometimes as a combination of both' (Sauerberg 7). Arguably, *The Constant Gardener* deploys the double-reference technique, not only in its allusion to real places, institutions and individuals in Kenya, but also in the ways in which the narrative is grafted onto a familiar Kenyan topography with such identifiable features as police brutality, corruption in the Moi regime and broadly, a recognisable geo-political topography. Indeed the apparent complicity of the British Secret Intelligence Service in the Julie Ward cover up, the SIS agent Mr. A's secret rendezvous with the Commissioner of Police Phillip Kilonzo, and the attempts to persuade John Ward that his daughter was struck by lightning would seem to be a real-life precursor to the fictional narrative of Tessa Quayle's murder and the British High Commission in le Carre's novel. In the novel too, the High Commission attempts to persuade Justin Quayle that his wife was having an affair with the black doctor, Arnold Bluhm, and that he went berserk and killed her.

The possible involvement of influential people in Kenyan politics in Julie Ward's death was later to figure as a reason behind the British High Commission's reluctance to be outspoken about the case. At the second inquest into Julie Ward's death held in Suffolk, Jenny Jenkins acknowledged that rumours regarding the possible involvement of one of President Moi's sons in the matter meant that the British High Commission in Nairobi had to handle the matter carefully, in the interests of the diplomatic relations between Kenya and Britain. Years later, John Ward was to speculate that perhaps Britain chose not to pressure the Kenyan government out of fear of the 'volatile' president Moi:

'President Moi was a volatile man who could kick the British out of Kenya just by flicking his fingers and the boys who look at the big board have to take that into consideration' he said. They probably thought 'We cannot bring Julie back, so there is nothing to be gained by being kicked out of Kenya'. (McVeigh online)

The parallels between this statement and the fictional Woodrow's claim 'we have thirty-five thousand indigenous Britons in Kenya whose precarious livelihood depends on President Moi's whim' (le Carre 52) are striking.

Certain insights emerge from a reading of these 'behind the scenes' actions alongside le Carre's novel. From these three sets of texts, we realise that Kenya had no monopoly over corruption and the derailment of the course of justice in the Julie Ward case. While it may be the case that British institutions and professionals had access to better facilities, which Ward opted to mobilise in his quest for the truth, this was evidently no insurance against manipulation of truth. The irony here lies in Ward's claim that while tourists get attacked, robbed or murdered in Europe too, 'the difference is that in those cities, the authorities will not try to sweep the murder under the carpet' (Ward xix). Ward's belief in British official commitment to truth and justice as contrasted with the Kenyan cover-up disintegrates in light of the British official complicity in the cover-up.

Read against the earlier mentioned implicit polarisation of Kenya and Britain, these contradictions alert us to the submerged fault lines which often lie beneath

the surface of accepted Manichean tenets of popular wisdom. In this sense, the concept of fault lines, drawn from geology, provides a useful metaphor for conceptualising the contradictions and competing interests that lay beneath the visible face of British support for Ward's quest for justice. Faulting is a particularly apt metaphor for understanding the textured nature of hegemonic enterprises by penetrating the outer crust of a unified position, to catch glimpses of the cracks that lie beneath the seemingly solid surface.

In geology, a fault refers to a crack in the earth's crust. Fault formation is the result of fracturing of solid rocks due to pressure and the movement of rock planes in different directions. Although the earth surface often appears to be continuous, the earth's crust beneath is made up of layers of different rock compositions, which are constantly under pressure. These rock plates often push and pull sometimes towards each other or in different directions, resulting in cracks or faults. For the most part though, these faults do not rupture the earth surface. However, under extreme pressure, or significant movement of the rocks within the earth's crust, there may be substantial movement which results in visible shifts on the earth surface leading to sinking or protrusion of sections of the earth surface.

I am alert to the complexities of transposing theories and conceptual tools across disciplines — especially ones as disparate as geology and social sciences. This is especially problematic when, as in this case, one transposes mechanical dynamics into the more abstract world of discourse. However, I find these geological ideas on faulting processes to be very useful as a metaphoric handle on ways of understanding internal contradictions inherent in structures and discourses because these geological processes in many ways mirror the tensions and contradictions that underpin seemingly homogeneous discourses. Thus, in the Julie Ward case, discourses such as the Kenya–Britain moral polarity; British commitment to justice and human rights; British diplomatic caution in dealing with the 'volatile' President Moi; Kenyans' cover-up to protect the tourism industry; all worked to mask the underlying fault lines of British involvement in frustrating the Ward family's quest for truth and justice. By extension, this unmask the popular discourse of Western/centre domination of the periphery.

These fault lines, if surfaced, would crumble Britain's discursive mask and in this case unmask the fact that its commitment to human rights and justice is contingent on its other interests in a given context. Despite the self-evident injustice and brutality of Ward's death and the implicit admission of a high-level cover-up by the state, Britain appeared to prioritise its other interests in the country; in much the same way as Brown rightly points out, the UK dissuaded radical reforms in Kenya's pursuit of democracy to preserve other polit-economic interests in the region which Kenya was strategically well-placed to serve. Put differently, in the Julie Ward case, unstated interests seemingly made it inconvenient for Britain to 'walk the talk' of human rights and justice.

The apparent British complicity in the cover-up suggests a covert symbiotic relationship with Kenya which collapses the popular wisdom articulated by Ward's bipolar lens. It further raises interesting thoughts about the notion of complicity, especially in contexts of sharp, hierarchical polarisations such as the Kenya–Britain relationship. Here, one is interested in the shapes of relationships that unfold in what Mary Louise Pratt has termed contact zones. Although she uses the phrase specifically in reference to those zones of interaction between black and white people in colonial setups, where 'black and white interests collided in a thousand different ways' (Pratt 7), I see the term as equally useful in describing those sites of convergence between overlapping spheres of control, in contexts marked by multiple epicentres of power, that defy linear hierarchies especially when they operate in concurrent orbits. The under-explored issue here becomes the shapes of relationships that ensue in contact zones where overlapping spheres of influence dispense with simple hierarchies.

Feminists often emphasise the 'simultaneity of oppression' of black and African women, where they are confronted with race, class, and gender subordination at the same time.⁵ Implicit in this is what I term the simultaneity of domination, which can be seen to unfold at the juncture of these sets of identities or discursive structures where, to use the case of African women, they find themselves confronted by three concurrent sets of dominant discourses articulated through race, gender and class. The idea of simultaneity of domination was at play in Julie Ward's death in Kenya which presented a complex contact zone between Britain and Kenya, with a range of overlapping spheres of control or epicentres of power that created interesting configurations of power relations. Geographically, Julie Ward died in the Maasai Mara Game Reserve, itself a space marked by several power centres, including the Narok Country Council and the surrounding Maasai community; the local and international investors in the tourism industry; and nationally, the Kenyan state institutions, including the police and the judiciary. At the same time, as a British citizen, Julie Ward's death further drew the interest of the British High Commission and by extension, Britain, both of which found themselves in a complex position, caught between the Ward family's anger and demand for justice, the Kenyan state actors' keenness to pass off the death as a natural accident and the pursuit of Britain's multiple interests in Kenya and the East African region which included diplomatic, economic and socio-political interests. In essence, Julie Ward's death was situated in this complex cartography of interlinked nodes of power centres with multiple and conflicting interests. These layers of interests in the case alert us to the concentric nature of power, and the co-existence of sometimes coinciding circles of influence, which re-configure hierarchical patterns of power relations between the dominant group and the subordinate group. These concentric circles of control and interests gesture towards the highly nuanced textures of complicity that often lie beneath

superficial constructions of polar binaries such as the centre — periphery moral scheme that Ward constructs in his book.

CONCLUSION

In her study, *Imperial Leather: Race Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock writes: 'I remain unconvinced that the sanctioned binaries — colonizer-colonized, self-other, dominance-resistance, metropolis-colony, colonial-postcolonial — are adequate to the task of accounting for, let alone strategically opposing the tenacious legacies of imperialism' (15). McClintock's observation is instructive in making sense of the complicities that fractured the British–Kenyan interactions in the quest for the truth behind Julie Ward's murder. My discussion reveals that beneath hegemonic structures and forces which often present an image of coherence often lurk submerged fault lines which contradict accepted wisdom. The British–Kenyan interactions in the Julie Ward matter highlight two key concerns. Firstly, that hegemonic groups' pursuit of the discourses they endorse is often constantly in flux, and contingent on a range of other interests, which determine the earnestness with which such discourses will be pursued.

From another perspective, Ward and le Carre's narratives are instructive on the workings of narrative in relation to dominant discourses, and the ways in which the narrative space allows for the possibility of either the reproduction of dominant discourses, as in the case of Ward's unquestioning replication of the bipolar lenses, or the destabilisation of such ideas as suggested by le Carre's narrative. Yet this is never a clear-cut process as narratives often challenge certain hegemonic discourses while simultaneously constructing others.

NOTES

- ¹ See Makau Mutua's (2001) notion of the savage-victim-saviour metaphor for a discussion of these dichotomies in international human rights discourse, which occupied a dominant position in Kenyan public discourse during the repressive Moi regime of the late 1980s – 1990s.
- ² This idea, though true, often overshadows the contribution of local actors in Kenya's democratic transition, by over-emphasising donor-pressure, which in any case, as our discussion here reveals, was both interested and qualified.
- ³ Brown further discusses a more specific case of the donor representatives' caginess in the face of gross human rights abuses in his essay 'Quiet Diplomacy and Recurring "Ethnic Clashes" in Kenya'. The international community was content to support the UNDP's intervention in the 1992 'ethnic clashes' in Kenya, thus avoiding direct involvement while simultaneously turning a blind eye to overwhelming evidence that they were instigated by high ranking officials in the Moi government. The state security officers' refused to intervene and state security officers disarmed victims who attempted to defend themselves (78–79). For Brown, this reticence was a strategic decision, since donors and diplomatic missions in Kenya were reluctant to antagonise the government because this might have jeopardised their programmes as their activities predominantly required them to work with the government (78–79).

- ⁴ The film approximates pharmaceutical scandals in Africa, more recently in Nigeria and Uganda.
- ⁵ See for instance Nnaemeka (1997); Nnaemeka (1998) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1994).

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PARSELELO KANTAI

The Reddykulass Generation

‘When the madness of an entire nation disturbs a solitary mind, it is not enough to say the man is mad.’

Francis Imbuga, *Betrayal in the City* (1976)

At a book launch in Nairobi in April 2006, Kenya’s most famous historian, Prof. Bethwel A. Ogot stood up and declared that *Project Kenya* was dead. The ideals that the nationalists had stood for were bankrupt. Kenya, he said, had never been more distant an idea than it was now at the beginning of the 21st century. Nationhood no longer existed. It had been replaced by sub-nationalism: the different ethnic groups, in effect, had eaten up the country. These declarations were a terrible indictment on leadership in Kenya, especially since they were coming from a man who had devoted over 50 years of his life to writing Kenya into being. At a time when the study of African history was considered primarily to be the study of Europeans in Africa, Ogot had defended the notion that the 43 African communities that fell within the colonial construction that was Kenya Colony *were* people, distinct nations. They had heritages and aspirations, traditions and worldviews. Later, Ogot was instrumental in giving life to what was little more than a rickety idea: by textualising a national identity he and others poured an Afro-centric history into what had previously been a space colonised by whites. People crept out of the darkness of their imagined savageries. We, Ogot had long postulated, had not been invented; We *were*.

That such an obvious statement could be so transformative is difficult for me and people of my generation to fully appreciate. People were validated, and at the euphoric moment of their validation — as the Union Jack fell and the Kenya flag went up — they entered into a new enterprise: Kenya. It was a huge undertaking. And now, one of its principal architects was announcing its failure.

We who were born under the Kenyan flag had listened to the propaganda of nationalism for so long, we internalised its cadences and often missed its import: that nations are built, they are projects and ideas. We were its building blocks, constructing in the very enterprise of our construction; we were, as we so often heard, the leaders of tomorrow. We were raised on a diet of free primary education, mandatory mid-morning primary school milk and personal rule: whatever His Excellency through the Voice of Kenya and/or his domestic representatives (the parents) said, was good for us. The Party was good but *Playboy*, for instance, was clearly not. So *Playboy* was banned and new party offices opened and those who sought out *Playboy* were bad and those who sang at the opening of the

new KANU branch were good. I am simplifying of course, but living within the hegemony of power made it impossible to imagine that your existence was in itself an experiment.

All around us, the experiment was going wrong. When I was 13, the Prisons Band — at the time His Excellency the President's favourite — sang:

We are a loving nation
United and free
We are! We are!
We gonna tell it all again
Ethiopians!
Welcome to the land of Kenya
People are happy and are living in peace
Ugandans!
Welcome to the land of Kenya
People are happy and are living in peace
Moi, Son of God
Moi, President of Kenya
People are happy and are living in peace.

The soloist of the Prisons Band was Kalenjin, from His Excellency's ethnic group, an ever-smiling man with a gap in his front teeth wider than mine. He sang with a heavy accent that mangled English and caused us city kids much superior laughter. But His Excellency liked the band and the song was played over and over. We noted the mangled accent and therefore registered the words as nonsensical. Only later did I recognise their self-congratulatory import. His Excellency would often remind us that 'Kenya is an island of peace in a sea of chaos'.

For the longest time, I had pronounced chaos as CH-A-O-S, and had no idea what it meant. My mother is from Uganda and we always knew, in the way that you know a beat on a distant drum, that there was trouble there. Once a year, my Jajja, my grandmother, would appear at our doorstep unannounced, and thin and wearing a silk *busuti* beneath a faded blue sweater. Once she had settled down and mother and daughter had exchanged greetings, she would tell us about Kampala. When she started making her annual visits to Nairobi, Tanzania was liberating Uganda from Idi Amin's murderous dictatorship. She would tell us about Nyerere's guns that boomed so deeply they could break your heart. But they had also chased away Amin. And then on later trips, she would tell us about Obote's soldiers who every evening drove in huge lorries into Kampala's neighbourhoods announcing in Kiswahili (which every Ugandan disdained as army language): *Ombeni Mungu wenu!* Pray to your God! It was a cue to switch off your lights and run into the bush.

My uncle Miro Kasozzi, who taught my younger brother and I chess and had two degrees from the Soviet Union, arrived one day from that bush. The soldiers

had come to his house and he had run out through the back, hid in the bush for two days and, when it was safe, caught a bus to Busia on the Kenya-Uganda border. All he had was the shirt he was wearing, his trousers and his certificates in an old brown briefcase.

These were stories from relatives who occupied a story-book reality. They smiled as they told us these stories, smiled that Kampala smile that insisted above all else that dignity must be retained even in the direst of circumstances. In lessening the blow for us, they banished us from that reality, gently pushed it over into an impossible realm. So we listened patiently and then politely inquired whether they liked *Football Made in Germany*, and dragged whoever it was to our bedroom, my brother's and mine, to show them the giant Fuji poster of Karlheinz Rummenigge. CH-A-O-S to a nine-year old boy obsessed with football could be defined as being deprived of the right to watch the Bayern Munich-Borussia Munchengladbach game because a new relative had suddenly appeared and the adults were talking in the sitting room where the TV was.

I marvel at the ingenuity that it took to keep the experiment alive. The codes unconsciously communicated across the landscape of our earnest faces that prevented the Ugandan visitor from dragging us to the edge of the abyss from which he had only just emerged; the elaborate infrastructure of adult secrecy that ensured that in ignorance lay our childhood bliss. The nation was being built inside us. We were its unconscious laboratory. We needed to be protected at all costs. But it was also the age: His Excellency was the Father of the nation. We were all his children. The Prisons Band sang 'welcome to the land of Kenya' bowed, boarded the green Prisons bus and went back to the office to torture some dissidents, misguided university lecturers who were being paid by foreign elements trying to destabilise His Excellency's government.

Like Kenya's other successful experiments of the time — tea and coffee as small-holder cash crops — we were rooted locally but designed for export. We, the sons and daughters of the nationalist elite, sat behind dark and heavy wooden desks wounded with the insignia of those other children — the white kids of colonial bureaucrats. 'JT was here' carved into the wood with the tip of a compass point. We spoke only when spoken to and bowed and curtsied and pronounced 'properly' by skipping over the superfluous 'er' or else got a rap on the knuckles from Mr Gerson Fonseca. We disdained Kiswahili and crammed facts about places we would never visit so that we could pass exams and slip behind other desks in national schools that were extensions of our primary schools, schools named Lenana and Nairobi that had not long ago been Duke of York and Prince of Wales. The prize at the end was the White Collar, a job behind another desk, a car in the secured parking lot, 2.8 kids in a primary school much like the ones we were in. So, repeat: wheat was grown in Regina, cattle ranches in the Pampas, the Bantu came from the Cameroon Forest and the Maasai thought they had come down from heaven on the skin of a cow.

This was our real heritage, despite Professor Ogot: ritualised incantation with no meaning save for the inner logic of developing collective obedience. We were signs that signified themselves, and we were rooted in contradiction. Sons and daughters of the victors of anti-colonial struggle, the only reliable precedent for our ongoing invention was the colonial elite our parents had replaced.

And that was the problem. That at the age of 10, some 20 years after independence, I was sitting behind a desk that had been marked years before by a settler boy; the disused inkwell probably still contained ink samples from his Fountain pen. We had failed to produce new realities for ourselves. Along the way, the new African elite, so young and transcendent when they came to power, were now older and fatter, and had lost their hunger. They were the Firsts: the first large cadre of Western-trained university graduates which, in the heady days of independence, filled the gap left by the departing colonial administrative bureaucracy. By the age of 30, many of them were sitting at the head of public corporations, running government departments, taking over senior management positions in multinational corporations. Doctors, engineers, administrators, others: they gave muscle to the rhetorical idea of Black Rule. Their extended stay in the West, their return trip with a rolled-up degree certificate and a graduation photograph, had given them Promethean reputations in their home villages. They were called *mzee* (old man) before they were 40. When they stood up to speak at local gatherings, entire locations fell silent; people cocked their ears and stared at their bare feet and tried to decipher every nuance and cadence in the great man's voice. The great men lived in Nairobi and did important things. They did not visit often. They were building the nation.

And yet a scene in Ayi Kwei Armah's unflinching account of corruption in early independent Ghana, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, comes to mind. It is the early years of independence and The Man, the main character, is walking through a former white neighbourhood in Accra. All around him the houses are now occupied by the new African elite. It is the names by the entrances to the mansions within that begin to disturb him. Everybody has changed their name to fit their uplifted circumstances. People who only a few years ago had been called Joe Amoako and Peter Kuffour are now A. Joseph and K. Peters: 'Perhaps it was not hate that drove us but love: love for the white man's things, his life' observes The Man.

In Kenya, the heroes of the independence struggle had been deftly replaced post-*uhuru* by the traitors of the struggle, the sons of the colonial-era chiefs who had collaborated with the colonial government during the Mau Mau insurgency. Once in power, President Kenyatta, a Kikuyu and Mau Mau's inspirational figure, had surrounded himself with the chiefs' sons. Further betrayals had taken place after independence. His most powerful supporter during the struggle, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, a Luo from Nyanza, was shunted aside as the government took on an increasingly Kikuyu character. One of the catch-phrases of those early days *kula matunda ya uhuru*, eat the fruits of independence, became the code-word for elite accumulation generally and Kikuyu patronage specifically.

On national days, we dutifully remembered the names of the original heroes. Cardboard characters who had lived heroically and died tragically at some point in a misty past, we only knew them as blank spaces for the end of term exam: Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi Waciuri was the ____ of Mau Mau. Mau Mau was the ____ of independence. History was one of several subjects to be conquered over three days of examinations. It had nothing to do with present reality. Words substituted meaning, and the past with its betrayals and accommodations, remained in the shadows.

So the past was out of bounds. And for good reason: who were our parents within the context of these huge betrayals? As benign and apolitical as, say, the pursuit of engineering or medicine was, what had they done to achieve what they had? Who had been betrayed? How many spaces were left blank in their personal histories? They had worked hard, they explained. And so we lived under a code of hard work. The pursuit of educational glory became our defining objective. Such arid values combined with the secrets of our parents' previous lives produced in my generation, not curiosity, but a vast need to conform. Instinctively, we knew the consequences of unconventional thought. So we feared unbeaten paths, ideas that had not been endorsed by authority. When we were older and unable to find meaning anywhere else, we excavated the already hollow words of our education and, judging them to be valuable, the best of us laid them down as a foundation on which to live. That, ultimately, is the meaning of the story I am about to tell you.

My friend Bee was found hanging in her ground floor apartment in Nairobi's Kilimani area on a Thursday morning in March 2005. She lived alone and left no suicide note. Fanatically neat and notoriously absent-minded, her farewell gesture was to leave her curtains partially open. It was a plea that whoever should discover her corpse would do so before it began to putrefy. So they found her and took her away. And then the phone calls and text messages and emails — the whole ritualised jumble that follows a death in middle-class Nairobi — all of it was set in motion. If anybody, a newcomer late to arrive into the circle gathered on an evening in a designated house where the funeral arrangements were being made, asked what had happened, it is quite possible that they received an honest answer. It is also quite possible that they did not — did not dare ask for fear of provoking that embarrassment always so present during such occasions. And if one of the mourners in a moment of weakness and honesty broke down and asked 'Why?' it would have been to a reception of equally confounded faces.

I was not there. I was in faraway Oxford being paid a nice scholarship stipend to ruminate on the Kenyan state. The last time I had seen Bee was on my daughter's birthday the previous December. Bee was Santayian's godmother. I received the news of her death from Santayian's mother, Bee's closest friend, Jane, my ex. A text message that said, simply and devastatingly: 'Hi, Bee died yesterday. Suicide.'

She and Jane had known each other since their university days. I knew Bee differently. We had gone to the same primary school. Her brother was my classmate.

We had lived for a time in the same neighbourhood. There had been many hours spent drinking and talking in what seemed to be several Nairobi incarnations: in our early 20s as students at the police canteen that was our neighbourhood local; as salaried folk, bumping into each other in bars and clubs downtown, a coincidence that on one occasion led me to Jane; even later, swapping invitations to parties at each other's houses. There were memories of shared holidays and lazy Sunday afternoons. Oddly fixed in my mind is a photograph, vintage Bee, taken of Santayian, one-tooth old and in a yellow sweater knitted by one of her grandmothers, scrambling across the carpet towards the camera, screeching, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

I remembered other things: the funeral of another mutual friend, Betty, who, finally accepting her HIV-positive status and deciding to go public with it, had died a few years earlier. Her funeral service had been held at the church in which I had grown up. I remember another friend, a playwright, Bee's and Jane's year-mate at the University of Nairobi, who, refusing to accept that he was positive, had died prematurely; going on anti-retrovirals would have been an admission to himself of his condition. Bee had worked with the playwright's brother. He and a cousin of mine were a couple until his death. And in the vines of our tangled relationships but cut off from the confines of Nairobi, that village of four million where such questions were not openly broached, something in me arrived at a tentative conclusion.

We used to joke that even when you *did* die in a car accident, it was probably still HIV-related. A suicide was so much easier to deduce; the act itself only confirmed lingering suspicions. AIDS was the silent guest at every death.

I bought a phone card from the Indian at the Off-Licence on North Oxford Parade and called Jane.

'Was she Positive?' I finally had the courage to ask after talking in circles.

'No,' Jane was emphatic. 'She would have told me.'

'Then what was it? Why did she do it?'

Jane told me an implausible story. Bee was depressed. Depressed because she was in debt.

'Why didn't she come to you if things were so bad?' I asked

'She had. She already owed me quite a bit.'

'But still...'

'I offered but she refused,' Jane explained. 'She said borrowing would just depress her some more.'

Bee owed all her friends money.

She had gone quiet soon after Christmas, the last time I had seen her. Eventually, when Jane had sought her out she had rolled up her sleeves and revealed a set of slash-marks across her wrists, barely healed. That last conversation, those

slashed wrists, they agreed, would be their secret. They would never discuss that foolishness again. Thinking about it now, it seems to me that even as she promised to desist from the foolishness, Bee had already retreated to a place from which there was no return.

Her father was inconsolable at her funeral. When Jane told him what she thought — when she gave him an answer to ‘Why’ — he asked, broken, why Bee hadn’t gone to him. But who can explain how far away, how impossible to reach everybody is when you are down that black hole?

Beyond our grief and her despair — beyond our private ‘Why’s — Bee’s suicide seemed to suggest a larger failure. If, as Stalin had once infamously remarked, one man’s death is a tragedy and one million a statistic, what drama had my friend been involved in? On what canvas was her death painted? What was her ‘tragic arc’?

Let us pull out from the close-up image on that grim Thursday morning. In March 2005, the sunlight glinted off the dozens of brand new cars parked in Bee’s large apartment complex where US\$ 500 a month secured you a prime piece of Nairobi upper middle-class real estate, with uniformed guards at the gate, electric fencing and ayahs taking out the trash and walking the baby.

Beyond the high stone walls that protect this brahminic existence lie the questions — the street with its statistics, its faceless many, the potholes, the honking *matatus*, the rat-race for rat-holes — questions we must answer in order to understand the state in which this enterprise called Project Kenya finds itself at the beginning of 21st century.

But not so fast. You need first to understand how and where Bee fitted on that canvas.

Bee was 36 years old, single and a post-graduate, at the top end of that growing ‘demographic’ that Nairobi’s advertisers and copywriters pulverised with ‘disposable lifestyle’ — cars, clothes, credit cards and cosmetics. She had in the 1990s accumulated a vast number of post-graduate certificates in addition to her degrees (a Bachelor of Science in Botany and a post-graduate degree in Journalism). She had a diploma in management, the mandatory certificates proving computer literacy, a certificate in disaster management, another as a human rights trainer. Like so many young Kenyans negotiating their way through the 1990s, Bee used certificates as a shield to ward off the evil spirits of those uncertain days. You never could tell when the next wave of retrenchments would come, and who it would carry away.

All around her, the old certainties were disappearing. Her parents had retired to their farm in Nyanza — they were Luo — after quietly distinguished careers in the civil service in Nairobi. They had managed to buy a house in Woodley, the same house in which Bee had grown up. But the ownership of the house was now disputed. Somebody with links that through a series of intricate paths eventually ended up at State House, somebody ‘connected’ had obtained a duplicate title deed on the property and was trying to sell it. So there was a court case or, more

accurately, the dispute over the property was now in judicial quicksand. Unless Bee or her siblings or her ageing parents knew someone at the High Court, the case would not be heard for years. The file would be lost. Or else, because they were dealing with somebody ‘connected’, there was every chance that they would one day be surprised to find the furniture from their childhood sitting on the sidewalk, and a strange woman, mistress of Mr Connected, inside the house supervising the movers, and waving a copy of a court order.

In the 1990s, His Excellency fell out of favour with his Western backers, and the privileges of an entitled elite two generations deep began to be shaken. The inalienable rights of the Firsts, the undoubted pedigree of their sons and daughters, their collective rights to the spoils of the post-colony (rural land, urban real estate, corporate jobs, resultant from years of cultivating the right accent); all that, as well as the old boy networks that secured those privileges, was profaned. The First Network, that of His Excellency and his tribesmen, was desperate for cash. Frozen out of the Paris Club — some dubious charge of trampling on human rights — and other Western donor clubs, this network turned inwards and began cannibalising itself. It liquidated everything it could lay its hands on: rivers and road reserves were privatised; forest and wildlife parks turned into ‘plots’ for its beneficiaries; public toilets and government houses disappeared, became shanty towns and apartment complexes, all property of mysterious new men with names that had no pedigree. Unprotected sex and AIDS became a metaphor for free-fall — for the unsheathing of the privileges of the independence elite and, as always, the victimisation of the citizenry in whose name this public shafting was conducted.

Certificates were condoms. But one also needed to know Who — more than How — could guarantee protection. Bee was prepared to sleep with no one, both literally and figuratively. She drew a line at that point. She had not been brought up that way. She had faith in merit. And so she drifted from job to job, assuming that she was not rising up the career ladder because she was restless, searching for that elusive ‘right’ path. She moved from the aid industry to the corporate sector, back and forth, and went to school at night. She was careful with her money and talented enough to ensure that there was always enough for rent and a little extra. Many of her friends left for the US and the UK. They left, or they died in alcohol and HIV.

In December 2002, a Gallup global poll declared Kenyans the most optimistic people in the world. Moi was leaving and a new coalition government, NARC, led by his old deputy Mwai Kibaki, was taking over. Over a million people gathered at Uhuru Park in Nairobi to witness Kibaki’s inauguration on December 30, 2002, nearly as many if not more than those that had turned up at midnight on December 12, 1963 to watch the Kenya flag rise for the first time. This was the Second Liberation. The new president sat in a wheelchair, recovering from a car accident, and pledged a renewal of Kenyan values — hard work, decency and honesty — and an end to corruption. A decade of accumulated certificates suddenly had real value.

Even as the propaganda of renewal, the busy-ness of cleaning up and sorting out, sounded from State House, the old politics of betrayal returned. Kibaki suffered a stroke. His old friends, a group of businessmen, retired technocrats and politicians — the Firsts, in their mid-dotage — fenced off the Presidency and locked out the NARC coalition partners, including its chief architect, Raila Odinga, son of Jaramogi Odinga.

Like the nationalism of the 1960s, the idea of renewal became farcical. An anti-corruption czar was appointed and run out of town as soon as he uncovered evidence of new corruption. Cabinet ministers gave TV interviews in the basement gymnasium of their new mansions as the press revealed fresh information on the latest corruption scam. As a sign of the new openness, the Mayor of Nairobi gave out his mobile phone number during a live FM appeal — he was appealing for patience at the height of a crippling water shortage.

Farce and cosmetics. Nairobi yielded to a beautification campaign. Streets were closed off for days. City Council workers in new luminous green jackets were repainting street signs. People joked that the paint was probably supplied by a good friend of a council strongman. A blacklisted company was contracted to redo a major city road at four times the advertised cost and twice the time. Hawkers and kiosks were cleared out of the city centre and the middle-class neighbourhoods west of Uhuru Highway, usually at night. Somebody wrote a Letter to the Editor, saying it was all very well to eject the hawkers from the city centre ('they are a menace') but there was absolutely no justification for Council *askaris* to use machetes in the process. A 50-year-old council estate was demolished. Its occupants were given 24 hours to pack up and leave. A few days later, the President laid the foundation stone for a new market at the site. Poverty was being eradicated. Street kids were sent to rehabilitation centres and arrested if they returned to the city centre. Even AIDS disappeared. Anti-retrovirals were made widely available. You no longer saw the ashy faces and falling hair and emaciated figures of full-blown AIDS sufferers, and the statistics proved that infection rates were falling.

There was money everywhere and nowhere. Banks offered personal loans for the salaried, as taxi drivers complained that even during the worst of the Moi times there had been more business than there was now. New appointments in both the government and the corporate sector were heavily lopsided in favour of the President's ethnic group, the Kikuyu. Mortgage finance companies put the customer first and apartments rose like hosannas across middle class Nairobi. The stock exchange was booming and corporate Kenya launched wave after wave of IPOs, all ridiculously over-subscribed. It was a festival of Tiger Economy capitalism. Still, the UN's Human Development Index report in 2004 said that standards of living in Kenya had fallen to their worst levels ever. But the economy was growing at five percent and there were day-long traffic jams to prove it.

Bee had an epiphany: she quit her job, sold her car and went to Durban for six weeks. When she returned, she had another certificate. She was a certified mountain-climbing guide, one of a handful in Kenya. She had decided that she was going to start her own business, 'Under Open Skies', a safari company that would specialise in walking tours. Its target market was the new middle-class, people like herself who loved to get away on the weekend. She registered the company, got her brother to design a website and started printing posters and leaflets and brochures. Like everything she did, she wanted to do it right.

Some months before she died, Bee was featured in *Eve Magazine* as 'young, independent, female and entrepreneurial', the embodiment of the new woman who was the magazine's target audience. Still the business did not pick up. Somehow it wasn't working. I met her less frequently now that I was no longer with Jane. But when we met, the usual Nairobi question of 'how is *biashara*?' — how is business, yielded a little too often, the response of the dark 1990s: it was slow, it wasn't picking up, it would take time. It did not occur to Bee — it never would have — that Who you knew still mattered more than what you knew. She borrowed some more and sank deeper into her hole, a smile on her face.

Bee killed herself because, even after everything had changed, nothing had changed. After democracy and renewal and anti-corruption drives, after the privatisation of public services and collective dreams and the repackaging of tribalism as the victory of decency over *grabiosis*, nothing had changed. She had bought into the highest ideals of a sham project where public good was code for private accumulation and the acquisition of papers could never protect you if you were from the wrong tribe. Bee, a Kenyan, had not been designed to speak in ethnic code, had not been designed to 'deal'.

* * * * *

Modern Kenya was not built by conquest or by mutual agreement; it was the product of the Lancaster House independence negotiations where The Firsts haggled over the fine print of a constitution drawn up by the departing colonials. There was no referendum at independence to decide whether the wholesale adoption of the colonial constitution was a good idea. The project existed in name only. It had been abandoned in favour of private accumulation based on the fiction of collective ethnic advancement: our people deserve to 'eat' because we suffered. In other words Kenyan identity was something attained through the experience of the Kenyan State: how had Kenya arrived at your doorstep? As a friend or an occupying force? How had you survived the experience?

In November, 2005 a truth about Kenya was uttered. During a referendum on the draft constitution — in which the country was divided into two — Bananas (Yes to the new constitution) and Oranges (No) — people voted overwhelmingly against the government's draft. Kibaki and his Kikuyu community, having voted Yes, were a bunch of Bananas in a sea of Orange. People wanted a new

constitution but they were not going to be manipulated by the new ‘eaters’. It was a profound statement: that people wanted to be Kenyan but not according to the designs of the State.

A new Kenya had to be found elsewhere. It has begun to emerge in different ways. My generation is sometimes called the *Reddykulass* Generation, after a group of eponymously-named comedians who made a career out of satirising Moi. We glance at the state and its boots and *rungus*, its seedy representatives and their just-add-water sycophancy, their promises of jobs and opportunities — we look at all that and laugh.

The Reddykulass Generation’s central experience is survival: the informalisation of Kenyan life as the rickety idea of ethnic patronage began to wobble underneath its half-truths and lusts. The life that had developed at the margins gradually invaded the bankrupt centre. In place of the English and Kiswahili constituted as the main currencies in which life was transacted across the ethnic divides, we now spoke *Sheng*. A bastard mixture of the two, long long condemned by officialdom, more and more Kenyans found themselves living within its fluid borders.

A new Kenya is developing from the margins. It is chaotic and unstructured but it has a distinct voice. In 2002, a Kenyan writer, Binyavanga Wainaina, won the Caine Prize for African Literature. He returned home from London and the Caine Prize, and along with other budding writers, established a journal *Kwani?* and sparked off a literary renaissance. The idea behind *Kwani?* was to showcase emergent literary talent. But there was a larger idea and that was to explore the different ways of being Kenyan.

This project of renewal is being replicated elsewhere: in the urban sound of new music, in the media where young journalists are continuously exposing corruption and robbing the State of its formerly unchallenged legitimacy. This emergent democracy has come in spite of the betrayals and backroom deals of a cynical leadership. It is brash and noisy, but it understands fundamentally that the silences and secrets of the past are no longer an option.

Project Kenya may be dead as an idea but *we are*. We continue to be. We cannot run away from what was developed inside us. *Kwani?* is now four years old. Around it has grown a stable of young writers who are re-defining the Kenyan space for a new generation. By providing a forum where a multiplicity of experiences of Kenyan-ness are presented, discussed and celebrated, it has broken with the old mould. What we lacked before was this diversity. Being Kenyan was to accept and to arrange oneself inside the mould of the official story of The Firsts. Through *this* assertion of cultural and political diversity, a new reality is taking shape.

NOTE

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GRACE A. MUSILA

Writing History's Silences: Interview with Parselelo Kantai

Parselelo Kantai is a Kenyan investigative journalist, academic and creative writer. A founding member of the East Africa literary magazine, *Kwani?*, Kantai has published several provocative short stories and novellas, among them 'The Reddykulass Generation', 'The Cock Thief', 'The Story of Comrade Lemma and the Jerusalem Boys' Band', and 'You Wreck Her'. The last two were nominated for the prestigious Caine Prize for African writing in 2004 and 2009 respectively. Kantai is currently working on a novel based on the life story of iconic Kenyan trade unionist and politician Tom Joseph Mboya, who was assassinated in 1969 in Nairobi.



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GAM: *How do you locate your writing in the current Kenyan literary landscape?*

PK: I am a working journalist. But fiction was always the destination since I started as a journalist, about 16 years ago. At the time, there weren't very many outlets in Kenya through which one could pursue fiction, until the advent of *Kwani?* literary magazine. In that sense then, it wouldn't be very far off the mark to say Kenyan fiction was actually re-imported from the Kenyan Diaspora. Many of those who weighed in during those early days of *Kwani?* were people who had just returned to Kenya. And they were returning around 2002; a time of a lot of hope and tremendous optimism for the future. It appeared that 40 years of the ruling party, Kenya African National Union (KANU), and 24 years of President Moi's rule was ending. This emergent writing (primarily published in *Kwani?* magazine) promised a chronicling of the new era as well as an interrogation of 25 years of silence.

GAM: *I'm glad you raise the question of memory and history: most of your stories share a certain concern with elements of Kenyan history. What is your interest in Kenyan history?*

PK: I am interested in Kenyan history and the recovery of a collective memory that seems to have disappeared or is not being discussed. After years of silence around contemporary Kenyan issues, some questions were only being addressed through the limited space of print and other media. Media platforms were not just limited, they were also very transient — you read a newspaper and that is it. For me then, when I started writing, fiction suggested some kind of permanence. And we now had an outlet through journals such as *Kwani?* to begin a ‘new-old’ conversation.

GAM: *What is your assessment of Kwani?’s contribution to the Kenyan literary revival so far?*

PK: As I said, a decade ago there was a lot of optimism and a great sense of possibility. I’m not completely convinced that that possibility has been achieved. I know I’m still very much in the initial stages of a journey that hopefully will be completed. But in terms of this so-called new Kenyan fiction in itself, I think it is yet to fulfil its promise. We still haven’t produced some of the very early things that we had promised. At its inception, the *Kwani?* literary wave seemed to indicate that we were working towards ‘The Great Kenyan Novel’ of our generation. All our conversations and interactions were threatening this. It still has not happened; and one can talk for hours about why it hasn’t happened.

GAM: *What are some of your speculations on why it has not happened?*

PK: Well ... [laughs] ... my views on the subject are rather outlandish.

GAM: [laughs] *Let us hear them.*

PK: For one, I think that *who* was producing the fiction was very critical in addressing *what* was going to be done by that fiction. Unlike an earlier generation of writers who were very closely aligned to the decolonisation, independence and nationalist cause, this generation of writers was in large part middle-class or, if you may, upper-middle class: a comfortable, educated and quite ‘Westernised’ group of people. And much of their fiction tended to do one of two things: either a kind of representative fiction — which chronicled a Kenyan ‘everyman’ experience — or what I would call a ‘me’ fiction, which in many ways was very self-indulgent — largely exploring the contours of the private world without necessarily approaching or confronting the politics that inscribed, informed and circumscribed those (private) worlds. The outcome of this was — at least in my opinion — a fiction that still has not confronted the hard realities of our generation.

GAM: *What are some of these realities that remain unexplored in your view?*

- PK:** Well, let's take a hypothetical example: you are an emerging Kenyan writer from some place in Southern Kiambu, but you have grown up in Nairobi, you have gone to all the good national schools around, gone to university abroad, been exposed to the possibility of fiction there; and you return to Kenya, to try and throw in your two bits into the collective pot. Now, there are some very uncomfortable truths that you may need to face up to if you are to really get some thorough-going material out there. A lot of it might even mean a confrontation with your family and its past. The landmark political events of independent Kenya may have involved your father, an uncle or some relative; or even people in the same family on either side of the political divide. So, what I sensed in a lot of the writing (and some people may even accuse me of the same thing), was a very subtle retreat from those confrontations. The outcome of which is a fiction that reads very well, but I wonder how much it begins to do some of the alarming, threatening and dissident work of some of the writers of an earlier generation. We have very good writing, but have we yet produced good fiction? I am not sure.
- GAM:** *What you are saying brings to mind your critique of the Kenyan middle-class and broadly the Kenyan nation project — or what you term 'Project Kenya' — in your story, 'The Reddykulass Generation'.*
- PK:** Very much so. I felt keenly about this during the Mwai Kibaki presidency in Kenya [2002–2007]. I began to see a replay of my own parents' and relatives' accounts of being young, ambitious and optimistic in Kenya in the late 1960s and early 1970s; and how those dreams began to unravel. I experienced a replay of these things in my own life, and saw them played out in my friends' lives and that whole Reddykulass Generation¹ as it were. There was a sense in which these forms of Project Kenya were themselves reproducing the pathologies of their parents' generation
- GAM:** *I don't know if this is something you are willing to go into, but I found it striking that 'The Reddykulass Generation' is both a critique of the Kenyan nation project and a personal obituary of your friend, Bee. Did it start as a comment on the nation project, or was it primarily an attempt to understand your friend's tragic suicide?*
- PK:** It was both. I was trying to say something about what was happening during the Kibaki era. One of the hardest things that happened for me was my friend's suicide. In the early years of the Kibaki regime [2003–2004], there was widespread triumphalism. The notion that things were booming was advertised everywhere, from the media to ordinary conversations. And yet when I looked around me — my own personal space, my relations, my friends and so on — I didn't see any sign of it. I

remember wondering: where is all this happening and who is it happening to, and why? And so when my friend starts going through what she goes through², it very much mirrored what was happening to many private and public institutions. All the key beneficiaries were closely affiliated with the president. And you have these people who held on to this idea of being Kenyan. These were people who went to national schools, and who had gone to the University of Nairobi, and other local universities. And they were now standing there, having decided not to cave in to all that was happening around them. They found themselves in this rapidly shrinking island; everybody else was caving in. This was the tragedy of my friend. I didn't try to embellish her in 'The Reddykulass Generation'. She was almost 'stupid' under the circumstances. And yet, it is only when you step back that you begin to understand the logic of what was going on. A lot of people have criticised me and said, 'how dare you try and explain someone's suicide as a kind of symbol of the failure of the country'; and I say, well, that is just my opinion and I'll try and convince you that the two sit very much together. You may not have known her, but to me, she embodied what we had been told about what it means to be Kenyan. And yet she found herself on the outside of things.

GAM: *For me, one of the things the story enables is a contextualising of what was going on in personal lives, by drawing connections to the broader socio-political landscape. At the same time, 'The Reddykulass Generation' laments the failure of the post-independence middle-class to imagine and produce new realities. What is your view of the contemporary Kenyan middle class, five years on [after the publication of 'The Reddykulass Generation']?*

PK: I think the critical moment of our generation and of our time will one way or another be 30th December 2007 and its aftermath.³ And whatever reading of that one has, pretty much informs how you view both the future and the past and where you place yourself in it. So, our failure to actually say something substantial about Kenya and the 2007 post-election violence, was very instructive and very much a part of this ongoing failure of myself and my writing colleagues. Hopefully this is a temporary situation. Hopefully there are writers, known and unknown, who are struggling and determined to produce something of that kind, because I think it is very important. But we can see how once again history replays itself. Just like 1969 and the assassination of Tom Mboya⁴ — which for me is a pivotal event in contemporary Kenyan history — there was an almost total silence after the event. Similarly, in 2007, you are surrounded by a literary silence.

GAM: *But what about the short-stories and novellas by Kenyan writers, most notably the Kwanini? Series about the 2007 post-election violence?*

PK: Granted, there were all kinds of attempts not so much to explain the situation, but to deconstruct it especially for Westerners so that we would not be confused with Rwanda, so that we would not be stereotyped under categories of atavism and savagery. This was through the contribution of the writing community especially the urban and the diaspora ones. But beyond that, has there been any serious interrogation of what had happened? How are we talking about it as writers? Are we really talking about it in a challenging way? No. We have shied away from it. We have retreated if not into those ethnic Bantustans⁵; then into other kinds of closets and shut doors. We are preoccupied in an enterprise at the moment, of on-going failure. And that really is the challenge for us as Kenyan writers right now.

GAM: *Do you see that failure to be linked to the fact that, as you noted earlier, our contemporary writers are part of the same middle class which is implicated in the drama? Or is it because of what you describe as historical the fragility of the Kenyan nation — or Project Kenya — as you describe it in 'The Reddykulass Generation'?*

PK: I think it is both. First and foremost, the Kenyan middle class as it exists today is very little more than two generations old. The other side of my family comes from Uganda, and on that side you find that they have a longer memory of being modern; of being educated; of driving cars; of going to school; of going abroad etc. Secondly, Project Kenya unravelled in many ways pre-2007. Some people may say there is an attempt to reconstruct it and so on at the moment. I don't want to talk about it. But the literary heritage that people of my generation were bequeathed was in itself in various stages of unravelling. How has the writer addressed these issues? I think in that sense, much of the kind of diaspora writing you now see is very much a reflection of these changing realities and at the same time it signals a retreat from the collective project. A retreat to the personal, one could argue, it is in itself also a retreat from one narrative of Project Kenya or even a retreat from the idea that there is a collective project that we are all invested in.

GAM: *What you are saying about this retreat to the personal is interesting, especially because while at the same time we are under the impression that we are getting somewhere. It is a little schizophrenic in that way. I'd like to move on to your story: 'The Story of Comrade Lemma and the Black Jerusalem Boys' Band'. It seems to have strong allusions to the General Mathenge fiasco.⁶ Is that the inspiration to the story?*

PK: I suppose in a very broad sense. The story was going into the territory of deliberate collective amnesia which then produces all these farcical

dramas. Kenya has always been a country with a national credo of ‘forward ever, backward never’. There is a very marked embarrassment and discomfort with the past primarily for political reasons. The Kenyatta government wanted the past shut out because it would create too many contradictions with the choices his regime made; and the Moi government continued to put a lid on that past. So when it is being reopened all those years later, whatever lies in that dark closet or in that dark well, is in many ways unrecognisable. I wrote that story in 2003 following the General Mathenge fiasco. The General Mathenge fiasco struck me as being so emblematic of the erosion of the past. I think that, more than anything else, the sudden ‘return’ of General Mathenge — a Mau Mau fighter who disappeared in the 1950s — showed the true nature of the amnesia, because when this man, Lemma Ayanu, is taken to meet his supposedly long-lost wife, she confirms that he is General Mathenge; and the way she confirmed this was by saying ‘I know him because of his teeth’. It turned out that it wasn’t him at all. I was trying to look at how this happened and why through that story.

GAM: *In a way ‘The Story of Comrade Lemma and the Jerusalem Boys’ Band’ zooms in on what can be termed ‘perception management’ which is a familiar element in Kenyan public life. I wonder whether you see this as a Kenyan peculiarity: do you see similar patterns across the region or even on the continent; or is it a uniquely Kenyan approach?*

PK: Quite the contrary. Go across the border to Uganda. Uganda is a country with the youngest population in the world. Uganda is a country that has had a very traumatic history. In many ways with 1986 and the coming of President Yoweri Museveni to power, you expect Uganda to be a country that denies its past for all sorts of political reasons. Instead, Uganda is a country that is locked inside its past and has a lot of difficulty trying to resolve some very ancient arguments around issues of identity, belonging, ethnicity, federation and the restitution of the kingdom among other concerns. To step into Uganda is to step into an ongoing conversation about history. On the other hand, given its settler colonial history one would have assumed Kenya would be a country that would be at pains to recover much of the past that had been shut out and rubbed out from its people. But this is barely the case.

GAM: *Given your assessment of the Kenyan writers’ struggles with their uncomfortable truths as you described them earlier, who could possibly lead this process of engaging with our troubled histories?*

PK: The irony is that, more than ever, today the writers have the opportunity to do things previous writers could not imagine. We now have other outlets

and collaborations that have been made possible by technology — film, TV, etc. And yet at the same time, you have the writer grappling with questions of audience and market. Unlike the high noon of the African Writers Series, where a writer like, let us say Dambudzo Marechera, was assured of an audience that spanned the continent; today the writer is preoccupied with seeking Western markets in order for his craft to be viable. Now, that comes with its own sets of problems and dilemmas. The Western market wants truths and realities translated. So, you as a writer are almost reduced to some kind of a literary tour guide who must take his little English lady of a certain age into his world and start by saying: ‘first and foremost please understand that we are human, that when ITV shows you an infant with flies in its face, when it shows you dead and starving people and bombed out villages, you must understand that that is only part of the story; that normal life is also happening here’. So, that ends up becoming a project in itself. Even before you get to bare-knuckle issues, you already are so invested in someone else’s project, that it takes a whole other enterprise to begin to talk a different language.

GAM: *Ok, so, moving on to your story, ‘The Cock Thief’. What inspired it?*

PK: ‘The Cock Thief’ is actually inspired by a true story. During President Moi’s last years, when he was a lame duck president, people started stealing from him. At one point someone stole this jogoo⁷ from his home in Kabarak. There was also another story about lots of election money — hundreds of millions of shillings, KANU⁸ campaign money that was being distributed from State house — was stolen by a driver. So I was interested in chronicling these issues. One of the things I hope I can accomplish with my fiction is writing these stories that run in and out of real political events. How one does that without naming names and getting libel charges I don’t know; but I was fascinated about that and this story was an attempt at that.

GAM: *I’m interested in rumour, because in both the Moi and Kibaki regimes, the Kenyan grapevine has always been a rich source of all sorts of truth. So I was struck by how this story weaves in lots of grapevine stories of the Moi regime, and I wondered what you were doing with that.*

PK: As you know, dictators make fascinating subjects; the whole subject of personal rule makes for fascinating stories. One of my favourite books is Garcia Marquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch* which chronicles the endless life-long rule of this dictator and is told in this stream of consciousness language that both sympathises and parodies this guy and his rule. And for me, you know ... [laughs] for want of a better word, I am very much a Nyayo child; I went to primary school during the Nyayo

years; I drank school milk; those mass choirs were very much a part of us; the Muungano national choir and all its music was very much a part of our growing up. There's lots of material there. How does one begin to use it? With 'The Cock Thief' I don't think I achieved all that I was trying to do, but one of the main things I was trying to do was to show how things become devalued at the end. How things that are so central to the autocrat and his fierceness and power mean nothing once you step out of the autocrat's shadow. So that when you are going to exchange what you understand as something valuable, smuggled out of that regime, people look at you and don't know what you are talking about; because it is as ordinary as can be. This is some of what I was trying to communicate in that story.

GAM: *The story also reminded me of those Jini stories⁹ that can be seen as an East African variation of the West African Mami Water figure. OK, could we talk a bit about the Mboya project? I understand you are working on a novel on Tom Mboya. First of all, why Mboya?*

PK: I just have this sense that the assassination of Mboya was the assassination of this project called Kenya. I feel that Mboya personally — or at least in his background — contained all the seeds that would allow a modern person in Kenya to transcend all the restrictions — Mboya was a modern guy. One could debate his politics, but Mboya the person, how he managed to move and accomplish so much in such a short time is fascinating to me. From the time he entered politics to his assassination, it was a span of 20 years. And during that time, he was in many senses the architect of modern Kenya.

But there are other interesting things as well, much more personal reasons as well. This is the book of my father's generation. This is the book that tries to explain who these people were. I find them the most remarkable people that have ever graced the continent in the last 100 years. These are guys who had just come from the village and in a few years they were out there quoting Shakespeare and then rejecting him and so on. They lived remarkable lives. And I've always been fascinated by them as individuals and some of the things they did and some of the choices they made. I am hoping that this book will be a vehicle to showcase their lives.

GAM: *When do you expect the Mboya novel to be out?*

PK: I wish I could say. I have been on this project for a very long time. I need six months to finish off the research, then at most a year to finish the book. It wouldn't be prudent to say now, but hopefully by the end of next year, there will be a manuscript.

GAM: *What you are saying about that revisiting of our fathers' generation takes me back to the Kwani? project. My sense of the Kwani? project is that at some point there seems to have been an Oedipal anxiety about the generation of the fathers. To a certain extent it looked like it could only legitimise itself by almost undermining or even being dismissive of the generation of the fathers.*

PK: Look, in Kenyan literary circles, you have people who have been heads of departments at the university for 30 years or longer. You have people who have refused to do anything new; and the only way the *Kwani?* project could exist was by trying to take them on and to stand outside its shadow. So, in that sense, yes maybe you are right about that Oedipal anxiety. So there might be a kind of challenging of decaying institutions; but there's very much a sense that many of these writers are interested in saying something about where they are coming from; and where they are coming from is little more than 40 years.

GAM: *What would you like to see African writing doing in the immediate future?*

PK: I'm hoping that as writers, one of the humps that we will move over is the difficulty of telling our own truths. We talk a lot about telling our own stories — this has become something of the African writers' refrain — that this is the time to tell our own stories. But we also need to recognise that behind the stories are truths that we need to confront which may become very uncomfortable — family truths, national truths, personal truths.

GAM: *Thank you so much you for your time, and for sharing your thoughts on your writing, and broadly, the state of Eastern/African writing.*

NOTES

¹ *Redykyluss* — a playful parodying of the word 'ridiculous' — is the stage name for a trio of Kenyan comedians: Tony Njuguna, John Kiarie and Walter Mongare. 'Redykyluss Generation' was first coined by the Kenyan writer and founder of *Kwani?* literary magazine, Binyavanga Wainaina in 2003, in celebration of what he saw as an unprecedented burst of creativity among Kenyan youths, which he envisioned *Kwani?* embodying and providing a platform for exploring. Kantai's story uses the term in the same way, as a tribute to a contemporary generation of politically engaged youths who have successfully used various genres of popular cultural productions and media platforms to engage with Kenyan social imaginaries.

² In 'The Reddykulass Generation' Kantai describes the experiences of his good friend — playwright and business woman — Bee, who sank into depression and eventually ended her life in 2005.

³ Kantai is referring here to the 30th December 2007 presidential elections in Kenya, whose results were violently contested, resulting in at least 2500 deaths, and over 500000 Kenyans internally displaced. The post-election violence was both a result and a cause of deep inter-ethnic tensions across the country.

- ⁴ Tom Joseph Mboya was a prominent Kenyan politician and Minister of Economic Development and Planning in the Jomo Kenyatta government. Mboya was shot dead on 5th July 1969 on Moi Avenue in Nairobi. Although the gunman, Nahashon Njenga Njoroge was convicted for the murder and hanged, it is believed that the assassination was ordered by a powerful Kenyan political figure.
- ⁵ Ethnic enclaves. Kantai borrows the South African term ‘bantustan’, which refers to territories designated by the white apartheid government as ethnically homogeneous homelands for black South Africans.
- ⁶ General Stanley Mathenge was a key figure in the Mau Mau Land and Freedom Army in the 1950s, who is believed to have escaped to neighbouring Ethiopia in the late 1950s. In 2003, the Kenyan press carried the news that he had been found living in a village in Ethiopia. Soon after, the state undertook to invite the man believed to be General Mathenge, who was given a hero’s welcome in Nairobi. This was to turn into an embarrassing situation, when it emerged that the person taken to be the Mau Mau veteran was in fact an Ethiopian farmer, Lemma Ayanu.
- ⁷ Swahili for ‘rooster’, the symbol of the political party, Kenya African National Union (KANU), which was the ruling party in Kenya for the period 1963–2002. The party apparently had a solid gold rooster, which was on display at the presidential residence in Kabarak, Nakuru. In ‘The Cock Thief’, Kantai creates an alternative rendition of the alleged theft of the gold rooster — the icon of the then ruling Party, Kenya African National Union (KANU) — from President Moi’s official residence during his last days in office.
- ⁸ Kenya African National Union.
- ⁹ The ‘*Jini*’ or ‘*djinn*’ are supernatural creatures which feature prominently in Swahili folklore in Eastern Africa; but might be originally drawn from Arab folklore and Islamic mythology.

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TINA STEINER

Writing on and over Communal Boundaries: East African Asian Subjectivities in Sophia Mustafa's *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga*

In my work, I attempt to write about East African Asians as a people who migrated to East Africa for a variety of historical reasons, transplanted themselves, and adopted the new countries as their homes. I try to explore how and why they lived in watertight cultural compartments which often left them ignorant of or indifferent towards what was going on around them.

(*In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* viii)

The idea of writing a novel of containment such as *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* germinated in my mind in the late 1940s, even though I only started to actually write it in the mid 1980s.

(*In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* 236)

Sophia Mustafa's¹ *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* (2002) is a realist novel set in the mid-1930s in Kenya and Ethiopia. The main character Mussavir Bashir, a young East African Asian doctor, volunteers for the British Red Cross medical corps during the eight-month-long Italian-Ethiopian war that took place in 1935–1936: 'Zaffer said the British were helping the Abyssinians by using the Red Cross in Kenya and East Africa. He said a small incident over the wells at Wal Wal had set all Europe aflame, so to speak' (94). Before Mussavir leaves for the war, his parents arrange his engagement to Shaira, a precocious thirteen-year-old he comes to love. In Ethiopia, he suffers minor injuries and shellshock. As a coping mechanism he becomes addicted to alcohol and marries an Italian-Somali nurse, who looks after him and with whom he expects a child. To the Bashirs' shame, the engagement to Shaira has to be dissolved and as a result Mussavir's father, Dr Mohammed Bashir, disowns him. Even though Mussavir and Halima, his wife, return to Garissa in the North Eastern province, the family does not visit them. Heart-broken about the fate of her eldest son, Ayesha Bashir travels with her husband to India to find a husband for their daughter, Hibba, who tragically dies, because of Dr. Bashir's haste to have her off his hands. Sabra, Shaira's mother, also fears the communal censorship: 'There would be considerable gossip and to crown it all, she herself would have to do a lot of explaining to her relations in India for the broken engagement' (223). The novel ends with a pair of letters, one

in which Mussavir explains to Shaira what happened to him during the war and the other by Shaira in which she pessimistically asserts the powerful claims that culture and family have on her: 'It is true that neither my family nor the law will allow me to do what I would like to. I am not free to make my own decisions' (234). The narrative style of the novel can best be described as ethnographic, since the novel teems with thick descriptions of cultural and geographical landscapes. The reader encounters minute, metonymic descriptions of food, fabrics, wedding rituals, religious ceremonies, and landscapes.

One such instance of thick description focuses on two characters who engage in a brief conversation about tea. This quotidian and seemingly insignificant occurrence is a useful starting point for this essay on *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* in which Mustafa explores the complex and often ambivalent pull on Eastern African Asians² in the first half of the twentieth century to participate in several stagings of communal and national subjectivity: as colonial subjects of the British empire; as diasporic Indian secular (or religious) national subjects; and as participants in African nationalist independence movements. The small passage on tea gestures towards all three of these strands:

When Mwangi presented the steaming tea in a cup and saucer on a small tray, Maaja Nai thanked him, smiling widely, 'Asante sana! Hiyo ndiyo na chai mazuri! Hapana ya mazungu. Now that is what I call a good cup of tea. It's not like the English tea,' and winked at Mwangi. It was a common belief that the Europeans drank their tea lukewarm and weak, and not scalding hot and milky as it should be.

Mwangi gave him a broad smile and thanked him profusely, saying, 'Asante, Bwana Kinyozi'. (125)

The ambiguity of tea as a signifier for cultural and national affiliation becomes apparent in several ways in this passage. The most obvious is the shared joke between the Asian cook, Maaja Nai, and Mwangi, the Kikuyu servant of the household, about the lack of taste of English tea. This claim jars immediately as tea is often seen as an expression of Englishness and it holds an important place in its national imaginary. A brief excursion into the history of tea helps to explain how diverse groups come to see themselves as the 'proper' custodians of tea: it is assumed that tea was first discovered and actively cultivated in China and Burma and that it moved across to Ceylon and India very quickly in the way that produce travelled during the Indian Ocean trade. Tea was introduced at the English court in 1660 under Charles II, because his Portuguese wife was used to 'taking her tea' (brought to Portugal with the explorers in the mid-1500s). What this anecdotal history shows is that the claim to tea as a national signifier is unstable and relies on pre-colonial Indian Ocean trade as much as empire for its distribution and appropriation. What might seem a sign of empire, becomes in this passage a signifier of an Asian African solidarity as the characters stake their claim on their superior brewing method of tea. It also suggests a shared history as both are subjects of the British empire and their joke can be read as a small everyday

act of mockery. Furthermore, the way the two brewing methods are contrasted — hot and milky versus lukewarm and weak — suggests that Indian and African food preparation has become entangled over time, so that: ‘food becomes a cross-cultural denominator on the East African coast’ (Moorthy 76). Food, and in this instance, tea, travelled further inland from the Swahili coast and typically Indian dishes are now part of a staple East African diet.

It comes as no surprise that the humour of this passage is articulated in Swahili, because the most utopian moments, glimpses of connection across ethnic and cultural boundaries, are registered in Mustafa’s texts through the use of Swahili. She herself learnt to speak the language fluently only when she became a politician and had to give speeches across the Arusha province for the Tanganyika African National Union in the late ’50s and early ’60s. This political commitment to learn Swahili on her part can be read as an expression of solidarity and of staking a claim of belonging.³ Gayatri Spivak in ‘The Politics of Translation’ speaks of the connection between solidarity and second language acquisition when she points out that ‘if you are interested in talking about the other, and/or making a *claim to be the other*, it is crucial to learn other languages’ (Spivak 192, [my emphasis]). To downplay Asianness in favour of becoming African, characterises much of Mustafa’s memoir *The Tanganyika Way. A Personal Story of Tanganyika’s Growth to Independence* ([1961] 2009) and her own performance of citizenship, yet in this novel she focuses instead on coercive communal affiliations that restrict and define individual identity. Consequently, just like the possibilities and limitations of food to cross boundaries, the potential of learning the other’s language is presented in the novel as limited by the social realities of the time, for it must be kept in mind that Mwangi is the African servant of the family. In other words, while the passage, through Swahili, bridges a cultural divide, it nevertheless firmly reinscribes the colonial social positioning of the characters and reinforces boundaries of class and race, in which Asians occupy a relatively privileged position vis-à-vis Africans. While Asianness is an identity category that comes into being in the East African diaspora, Mustafa painstakingly portrays the fractures within this category as well, that is, the religious and cultural differences between groups that were important in India are recreated in the diasporic space and divide the Asian community. These internal divisions materialise in the inability of members of different castes to eat together: ‘The Brahmin guests came, greeted, and congratulated the bride and groom but left before the food was served’ (155). Or even to share a drink as is the case between two different sects of Shia Muslims: ‘In fact, the Ismailis, who were followers of the Aga Khan, would not even drink a glass of water from an Isthanshahi home. So it was surprising that these two families were civil and polite to one another, and that both welcomed Sabra and her family’ (180). Again, separation is juxtaposed to a warm hospitality that transcends entrenched communal boundaries. Stephen Clingman in *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature*

of the *Boundary* defines boundary as a site of demarcation and barrier and of transition and movement. The question is not whether boundaries exist, but rather ‘what kind of boundaries they are’ (4). Boundaries, according to Clingman, are not solely dividing lines between two or more sets of differences, but rather constitute transitory spaces that link various subject positions.

Such simultaneous contradictory impulses as explored above, I want to argue, lie at the heart of Mustafa’s fictional project. She intends, as stated in the first epigraph, to portray the cultural and political insularity of East African Asian communities while being highly critical of this unengaged and indifferent position. In this regard it is important to keep in mind that her own political investment in Tanganyika’s struggle for independence — which she documents in her memoir *The Tanganyika Way. A Personal Story of Tanganyika’s Growth to Independence* ([1961] 2009) — offers a critique of such insularity and internal politics of division in favour of claiming Africanness. Mustafa insists repeatedly that she considered herself as Tanganyikan, rather than a member of the Asian community, and, as I have argued elsewhere (Steiner, 2011), her cosmopolitan vision generates a productive tension in her narratives where subjectivity is conceived *centripetally*, where family, religion and caste/class define and constitute real boundaries and *centrifugally*, where the fault lines of such identificatory processes are laid bare. Like an ethnographer⁴, who wants to capture in detail a way of life different to her own, Mustafa writes on and over the boundary of an identity politics that values ethnic identity over national affiliation and this makes her narratives a fascinating testing ground for interrogating diasporic subject formations. To write ‘on’ the boundary suggests an attentiveness to the various, very real social demarcations that contain and restrict the possibilities of agency of individual characters. This is complicated, however, by the movement of characters across boundaries, often precipitated by transnational trajectories over which they have little control. In other words, writing ‘on’ boundaries, for Mustafa inevitably means writing ‘over’ boundaries. Unlike the traditional ethnographer who, according to James Clifford, would localise ‘what is actually a regional/national/global nexus, relegating to the margins the external relations and displacements of a ‘culture’’ (24), Mustafa’s text is attentive to the itinerancy of cultural formations with its focus on the diasporic affiliations of East African Asians. In the face of a history of travel from India to East Africa, the narrative represents communal insularity as much as an aspiration as it is an unevenly enforced social formation. The narrative present that links Mussolini’s rise to power to Asians as pawns of the British empire exposes the difficulty with which the East African Asian community is able to define itself. Thus, Mustafa’s overtly-stated focus on East African Asians as first and foremost diasporic Indians interweaves at times with the other two strands of subject positions that were available to Asians in the early part of the twentieth century in East Africa: as colonial agents and as participants in African nationalist movements. James R. Brennan points out in this regard that most historical studies of Asians in East Africa only register the latter two in that they

employ analytical frameworks of anti-colonialism and African nationalism, ascribing to Indians the role of either nationalist heroes or colonialist collaborators. Indians could be both, but ... over much of the colonial period they were above all advocates of Indian secular and religious nationalisms, which overlapped in both fruitful and destructive ways with emergent African nationalisms. (Brennan 44)

Brennan thus emphasises the primary identificatory impetus as one of diaspora, where secular and religious nationalisms are expressions of strong ties to India, the original homeland, and only then do these intersect with local African concerns. This diasporic angle is emphasised in Mustafa's fiction through the focus on family and communal life. In this way, her novels explore the claim of communal singularity in the fashioning of subjectivity that is based on religious and ethnic identifications that seek to foreclose, restrict and hive off the possibility of the many.⁵ The insularity of Asian groups in East Africa and the perceived lack of local contiguity that the novel emphasises, highlight an aspect of transnational diasporic formations that foregrounds stasis and seamless continuity between home and abroad. Diasporas can exhibit a 'strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time, based on shared history, culture and religion', and a 'sustained network of social relationships with members of the group living in different countries of settlement' (Bakewell 5). The historian, Richa Nagar, argues in 'The South Asian Diaspora in Tanzania: A History Retold' that despite the heterogeneity in background and experiences: 'Asians as a whole ... largely remained socially, politically, and spatially isolated from their African neighbors' (62). This view echoes Mustafa's assertions quoted above about the cultural 'walls' between Asians and their local East African environments, a lack of connection that she attributes to ignorance and indifference. While Mustafa's novels, particularly *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga*, capture the strong cultural ties to India in order to justify cultural and religious boundaries between groups of Asians, the narratives simultaneously write over such boundaries in portraying the heterogeneity that fracture cohesive notions of community from within. The boundaries that this essay engages with are boundaries of material culture, like food, attire, living conditions and the entanglement of language. All these become profoundly affected by the experience of war in the case of the main protagonist.

The writing on and over this boundary can be explored in relation to the two terms that Mustafa uses in the epigraphs mentioned at the start of this paper to frame her imaginative engagement with variously overlapping but also contestatory forms of belonging: 'watertight cultural compartments' and 'containment'. At first glance, both concepts suggest the isolation of Asians in East Africa in fairly rigid ways. However, even the inward looking and bounded notion of subjectivity so vividly sketched by the term 'watertight compartment' simultaneously evokes a larger space within which the compartment is situated (that is, by definition a compartment can only exist in relation to the bigger space around it). Similarly, the centripetal, inward and bounded meaning of the term 'containment', that is 'keeping something from spreading' (wordnetweb.princeton.edu) has another

denotative meaning, which suggests the centrifugal movement into alliances that are directed outwards. This second meaning of containment propels the plot of *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* as it tells the story of a young Kenyan Asian doctor, Mussavir Bashir, who is a volunteer for the Red Cross medical corps during the Italian-Ethiopian war of 1935–1936 to support the Ethiopian side, even though the League of Nations did not officially condemn Mussolini's invasion. In her acknowledgments page to *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga*, Mustafa remarks that the idea of writing a novel of containment was sparked by the intimate fate of two families that were directly affected by this war:

I was old enough in the 1930s to be aware of what was called the Abyssinian War and the toll it took within the larger region, including its devastating effects on two Muslim families of second generation Asians living in Kenya during that period. (236)

In other words, the specific cultural practices of the families in the novel exist in a relational reciprocity to larger national and transnational trajectories and Mustafa's text captures this through the juxtaposition of plot (that is regional and trans-continental) and minute detailed descriptions of food, clothes, wedding rituals that speak of strategies of cultural containment.⁶ What her narratives represent convincingly in this contrasting movement is the immense communal investment in a cultural tradition that creates the illusion of unchanging, watertight enclosures, but life itself (as narrativised by the plot structure) issues a challenge to such communal identity politics.

Social insularity and tradition are narrativised in detailed descriptions of religious beliefs and cultural practices, as expressed for example by Ayesha Bashir in a conversation with her son Mussavir about his possible engagement: "Traditions and customs have not changed, my son," she said as she hurled her blue dupatta over her shoulder. She was wearing a blue printed shalwar kamiz' (1). The text underscores the authority of these words by drawing the reader's attention to the character's traditional clothing to suggest the authenticity of her claims about culture. However, such claims of containment are challenged by the sheer terrain onto which they are mapped through the movement of the plot as characters travel voluntarily or by force from Nairobi to Addis Ababa from Nyeri to Delhi, and in her other novel, *The Broken Reed*, from Nyasaland to Rawalpindi. What particularly interests me is the way in which insularity conflates contradictory impulses in that it suggests circularity and circumscribed autonomy but also insists on diasporic connections beyond the insular in relations across regions and nations. The antinomy of the insular is formulated well by Antonis Balasopoulos in his essay, 'Nesologies: Island Form and Postcolonial Geopolitics', where he traces the discursive production of insularity throughout history with attention to the interplay between island geography and ideas of ideal states as 'homogenous, sharply demarcated, and singular geopolitical identities' (Balasopoulos 10–11). However, as he points out, the island also extends outward toward zones of otherness, where the island becomes a figure for colonial expansion

(11). The reading of her novel draws attention to the way in which the textural topographies of cultural and geographical landscapes result in spatial decentring even when it traces the insular shape and content of supposedly bounded cultural compartments. It is therefore important to pay attention to Mustafa's cultural and geographical representation of the Eastern African landscape in the eyes of second generation of Asians in East Africa. I argue that through spatial decentring — by writing on and over boundaries — the fraught process of constituting community and tradition is laid bare.

Mustafa's focus on facets of the everyday clearly establishes the link between the Asian community in Kenya and relatives in India, the place of origin and touchstone of cultural/religious and secular nationalisms. For example, the narrator describes the recreation of social space along ethnic lines directly inherited from India: 'They all lived behind the shops, with an Ismaili jamatkhana, a tiny Muslim mosque, two Hindu temples of different denominations, and a Sikh gurdwara all nearby in the township, in a sort of watertight existence along ethnic lines, strictly following the culture and norms of India' (19). What is fascinating in this regard, is that colonial city planning intersects and exacerbates internal divisions, by externally regulating the city space, particularly in Nairobi:

Through architectural zoning and legislation — pass laws — the colonialist British then embarked on a process that would later ensure that they had almost total control of the city in terms [of] who did or did not inhabit it. This decision of policing inclusion/exclusion was based on quasi-legal commissions that recommended racially based segregation of housing quarters that yielded distinctly separate housing for the minority whites who occupied the north and west of the city, followed by Asians (in the Indian *bazaar*) and then Africans (behind the railway quarters). (Siundu 263)

How this city layout polices and how it intersects with the Indian caste system, is captured in a conversation between Mussavir and two other young Asian doctors on their way to Ethiopia. It is useful to quote this passage in its entirety:

'But even back in India we do not have access to many hotels,' said Gopalan, 'and I do not see it happening here. The British will never make the Europeans open their hotels to us, therefore we should do something ourselves.'

'Would that not in a way be accepting separate racial development?' asked Mussavir.

'Well, we are already a caste-conscious society, so what difference will race separation make?' said Gopalan.

'I don't agree. The existing hotels should be opened to all in a democratic society.' Mussavir was emphatic.

'It would be too risky, will be the argument,' added Tara Chand.

'What's the risk?' Mussavir questioned.

'If they allow Asians they will also have to allow Africans,' said Tara Chand. (171)

The conversation continues in a similar vein until Mussavir remarks that the legacy of the caste system compounds the attempts at segregation by the colonial authorities. The relative freedom to settle in certain areas of the city allowed

Indian diasporic communities to organise themselves in pretty much the same way as in India. Again Mustafa uses words like ‘enclaves’ and ‘compartments’ that separate various Asian communities (173). Dr Mohammed Bashir arrives with Ayesha in Kenya before WWI, and is recruited by the colonial government first to Nairobi and then to the district hospital in Nyeri. He home-schools all his children as there are no suitable schools in Nyeri and then sends his sons to India for tertiary study. In contrast to the home-schooling in Nyeri, Nairobi offers schools for all religious communities in an area similarly spatially demarcated as the living arrangements mentioned above:

A few Indian girls’ religious and private schools were located in that area. There was the Muslim Girls School behind the bus station in the area known as Gian Singh’s Shamba. And on the other side of Race Course Road, where it joined Duke Street, was the Sanatan Dharam Girls School as well as the Sanatan Dharam Temple. Behind that stood the Sikh Girls School as well as the huge imposing Singh Sabha Gurdwara with its grand round dome in black and gold. The Arya Samaj Girls School and the Aray Samaj itself were also not too far from there. The early pupils, all girls escorted by father and brothers, headed to their various institutions. Their saris and trouser suits made a spate of colour: the white suits and yellow chunnis of the Sikh girls, the colourful turbans of their fathers and brothers, the pink saris of the Sanatan girls, and the deeper yellow saris of the Arya Samaj girls intermingled. There were no religions or private schools for boys. They all attended the Government Indian Boys Primary and Secondary Schools, which were at the other end near the main railway station.

(32)

What is interesting, and where Mustafa locates her critique, is that the ethnic demarcations do not seem to play such a significant role in the education of boys: in other words, women are seen as the carriers of cultural tradition and thus have to be shielded from too much interaction with other communities. In ‘Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence against Women in Africa’, Amina Mama similarly asserts that women are frequently perceived as ‘the bearers and upholders of traditions and customs, as reservoirs of culture’ (Mama 54). Curiosity about other cultural practices in girls is discouraged, though the text shows that this boundary cannot be easily policed as the girls relish the Hindu wedding they attend, and their neighbours, who are Shia Muslims, invite them to celebrate a majlis with them during Muharram, where they learn to recite *marcias* (197–201).

Religious continuity is further undermined by the generational gap that the text explores between Mussavir and Dr. Bashir, his father: ‘Mussavir was of a different generation. He was not a bad Muslim but could not adhere strictly to all the tenets of the faith. He had started smoking when in college and had also ventured to taste alcoholic drinks, absolutely forbidden by Islam’ (22). Interestingly, as a result of shellshock he turns to alcohol as a coping mechanism. This outrages his father, Dr. Bashir: ‘He knows I shall never forgive him even if Allah does. My whole life’s work undone. I have all my life been a devout and God-fearing Muslim, and to have produced a son who has become an alcoholic! I don’t ever want to see

him again' (222). The narrative sympathy lies with Mussavir's predicament and several characters comment on Dr. Bashir's intolerant and authoritarian manner to criticise his notion of religious purity which makes him such a forbidding person who clearly does not understand that crossing the boundary between war and peace irrevocably shifts the ground under Mussavir's feet.

In order to keep the ties between the diaspora and India alive, transnational travel and in particular, transnational marriage arrangements are the order of the day. Thus, the text draws the readers' attention to the fact that for this middle class family, travel between Kenya and India is quite a regular affair, and several marriages are arranged during these travels.⁷ The novel spends a lot of time discussing wedding arrangements and ceremonies. There is a big Hindu wedding in Nyeri to which the Bashir and Shaira families are all invited. The reader is also told about the Geet ceremony, the Hindu wedding in all its detail, (even songs are discussed at length in the text), which compares more favourably to the practices of Muslim weddings, as Mussavir muses: 'During the ceremony Mussavir could not help comparing the Hindu marriage ceremony and rituals to Muslim practices. He always found the Muslim rituals had a sense of sombreness about them. No fun or glamour, or even colour' (74).

The novel cuts across these demarcations, while still paying attention to the asymmetrical relations of power, when it links the Asian community to its African surroundings, which it captures most extensively in the interactions with servants and registers in the text through the frequent use of Swahili. In fact, the interactions in Swahili draw the family members and the servants into a shared reality, even if they reify hierarchical relations, as revealed in the passage on tea. For example, much of the humour is found in such moments of exchange, often at the expense of the British:

The man [Kikuyu chicken seller] hummed and hawed, saying he had walked from across three ridges without breakfast and this was his first sale of the day. He needed the money to pay the kodi tax.

'Kweli?' asked Ayesha.

'Absolutely true Mama, haki ya Mu...' He raised his right hand but had not finished his sentence when Mussavir, standing at the window, completed the man's sentence: 'haki ya mzungu?' Mugro and Ayesha burst out laughing. The old man looked at the window and laughed loudly, then wiped his eyes with his free hand and said, 'Haki ya Mungu. Hapana mzungu!' I swear by God, not the Europeans, as you jest!

They all laughed. Asians and Africans, when not telling the truth, sometimes used the Swahili word for European instead of God when affirming or swearing.

'All right Mzee, you have made me laugh so early in the morning. I'll buy all your chickens and you can have a mug of hot tea.' (39)

While these examples are not unproblematic in that they elide the differences in status for the sake of poking fun at the British, they nonetheless show that the characters are at least fluent in the language of their surroundings. This entanglement of languages due to living in close proximity exerts a subtle pressure

on Asians to engage with their African surroundings, to affirm their Africanness, and in the text, Mustafa shows how the children of the household had picked up some words of the indigenous languages spoken by their servants: 'The children picked up a lot of Luo words from him. The Kikuyu words and phrases learnt from Mwangi and Mama Wanjiro, like 'Ati rey rey, nekwaga nmo,' were replaced by 'O mera! Idi Kanye. Kel bando, odek!' and so on' (181). By the same token, the servants also pick up words in Indian languages.

The most prominent challenge to the insularity of Asians in the text is registered through the war in Ethiopia. Mussavir is one of many East African Asian doctors who have volunteered as medical personnel for the International Red Cross: 'Mussavir qualifies as a medical doctor in Delhi at just about the time that Mussolini's armies invaded Abyssinia. He returned to Kenya to join the medical department like his father. The Red Cross Society was recruiting volunteer doctors to help in Abyssinia' (6). It is actually Mussavir's father, Dr. Bashir, who puts Mussavir's name on the list of volunteer doctors with the view that this would aid his son's advancement within the ranks of the medical department. However, after tragedy befalls the family, others judge his lack of insight: 'Bhai Bashir is, I am sorry to say, a hard man. With all his piety and regularity in prayers and whatnot, he lacks sensitivity. Look how he first sent Mussavir to this Abyssinian war so soon after his studies' (227). The contrast in this passage between 'hardness' and 'sensitivity' attributes the former to an overtly traditional piety that does not see the human cost, especially in relation to war. This eight-month war caused a lot of movement of peoples across the East African landscape in both directions — towards and away from the conflict. Early on in the narrative, for example, the Asians send their families to relatives in safer regions: 'Badru's wife said some of their relatives, business people in Addis Ababa and Mogadishu, were sending their women and children to Kenya' (20). But the other direction is equally well travelled:

They said since the crisis developed, every train from Djibouti goes loaded with its quota of adventurers, journalists, and mercenaries, as well as genuine volunteers of all kinds. Like moths around a lamp, they are pouring into the country despite embargoes and difficulties. All kinds of European, Slav, and even Turkish mercenaries have surfaced. (176)

Mussavir's itinerary, like those of the travellers mentioned in the quote above, is complex. First, he takes a train from Nairobi to Mombasa, where he boards a ship to Djibouti. After a further five-day train journey, he arrives in Addis Ababa. As his letters to Shaira suggest, he is a keen observer of landscape and people (again, the question of language is interesting as he writes to her in Urdu, so she can practice the language). The Italian warfare during these eight months is ferocious and it has been amply documented that gas was used against military but also against civilian targets despite the fact that Italy had signed the Geneva Convention in 1925 (Labanca 8; Gooch 1022). The novel points out that East

Africans were very well informed that the lack of help from Britain and France bolstered Italy's confidence: '[W]ould the Italians have dared to attack in the first place if they thought the Great Powers and the League of Nations were really going to help Abyssinia?' (145). These geopolitical forces directly impact on Mussavir's experience of the war, because his medical camp is bombed and he barely survives the attack: 'Mussavir was in an air-raid shelter when a bomb fell into it and killed one of his assistants. Mussavir rushed out screaming and dragging the body of the man, whose guts were hanging out of his split belly' (212). The text dwells on many atrocities that took place in this war and it seems to me that it propels the characters quite forcefully and literally out of the security of cultural enclaves, or rather, that it exposes the artifice of containment and immutability suggested by such cultural identifications — hence the fact that Shaira is just as affected by the consequences of the war as is Mussavir. While Dr Bashir volunteers his son as an expression of his sense of duty to the colonial government, the consequences of this action prevent Mussavir's stellar career in the medical field, but more crucially it prevents his re-insertion into the diasporic Asian community of which he was previously a part, in fact, it could be suggested that he is more 'African' after the war than he ever was before.

To conclude, *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* is a complex exploration of the boundaries of communal processes of identity formation that are nevertheless traversed in multiple ways. I stated in the introduction to this essay that one can speak of three strands of subject formations that were available to East African Asians in the first half of the twentieth century: that of colonial subjects, of Indian diasporic subjects and as participants in African independence movements. What the subsequent analysis of Mustafa's narrative shows is that this threefold schema is rather crude when applied to the lived experience of her characters in which these strands converge and diverge in multiple ways. Even though it could be said that the central identificatory force is one of diaspora, of insularity and containment, the novel imaginatively destabilises and decentres this force. This is achieved mainly through the movement of plot that is trans-regional and transnational in the novel. In other words, once the characters are on the move, even if only briefly from their house to their neighbours' house, or through their communication with Africans in Swahili, but more prominently in their journeys through East Africa, the claim of singular identities is unmasked as untenable. These conflicting impulses generate a productive tension in Mustafa's narratives where subjectivity is conceived centripetally, where family, religion and caste/class define and constitute real boundaries and centrifugally, where the fault lines of such identificatory processes are laid bare.

NOTES

- ¹ Sophia Mustafa (1922–2005), novelist and political activist of South Asian origin, was one of Tanganyika's first women members of parliament for the Tanganyika African National Union active in the transition from a British administered trust territory to

independent Tanzania under Julius K. Nyerere in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Her published work comprises a non-fictional memoir of her time in politics *The Tanganyika Way. A Personal Story of Tanganyika's Growth to Independence* ([1961] 2009) and two novels *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* (2002) and *Broken Reed* (2005) that were published forty years after the memoir.

- ² In the East African context, *Asian* refers exclusively to peoples ancestrally from the Indian subcontinent.
- ³ I see Mustafa's effort to learn Swahili as directly connected to her investment in the political struggle for Tanganyika's independence: 'When Sophia is selected as the official TANU candidate for the Northern Region she begins also a personal journey of becoming invested in the lives of others that she knew so little about and at the heart of this journey lies her effort to learn Swahili fluent enough to be able to communicate without the help of a translator' (Steiner 143).
- ⁴ Especially *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* reads at times like an ethnographic account of various rituals and ceremonies accompanied by detailed descriptions of material culture.
- ⁵ The idea of singular identity versus many identities comes from Stephen Clingman's *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary*: 'A way of thinking about the contemporary world is to see it under two competing descriptions and tendencies, of the *many* and the *one*... That tendency to the *one* or *singular* is consistent in its orientation: a way of ruling out transition, change, interaction, modulation, morphology, transformation' (5).
- ⁶ There are many dishes mentioned, often accompanied by thick descriptions of spices, condiments and ways of cooking: parathas, katlama, kebabs, samosas, bhajias, farsan, mithai, dhoklas, ugali, urio, chapattis, curry, toast, eggs, roasted maize, moongi dal, dates, candy, laddus, gulabjamuns, barfi, puris, fruitcake, mathees, shakkar paras, kofta, chutney, fruit salad, mutton korma, sufuria of zarda, nan, to name some of them.
- ⁷ Richa Nagar's research on marriage practices yields interesting information regarding whether wives are found in India or in East Africa: 'My interviews revealed that most Ismaili, Ithna Asheri, Bohora, Lohana, Bhatia and Vaniya men who settled in Tanganyika and Zanzibar as traders during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, returned to Kutch, Kathiawar and Gujarat to marry women of their communities. However, many laborers from Sunni and Baluchi communities and a few from the Ismaili and Ithna Asheri communities among the early settlers, as well as many Ramgharia Sikhs, among the latter immigrants (most of them being 'ex-coolies') could not afford to return 'home'. They therefore either married, or lived with African, Arab, or 'half caste' women. Some of these 'mixed couples' were accepted by the husbands' communities and severed links with their African or Arab kin. However, most were rejected by their Asian communities' (64).

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ANDREW VAN DER VLIES

Art as Archive: Queer Activism and Contemporary South African Visual Cultures

This essay reflects principally on the work of South African artist Nicholas Hlobo, born in Cape Town in 1975, who has, in a relatively short space of time, achieved international art-world visibility for his sculptural objects made from rubber, fabric, and found objects (often including wood, soap, and colonial-era furniture). I draw for the purposes of comparison on the work of photographer Zanele Muholi (born in 1972 in Umlazi, Durban), an artist-activist whose primary concern is, in her own words, to present ‘positive imagery of black queers (especially lesbians) in South African society and beyond’ (Muholi 2010 online; Williamson 2009 130). Both artists are well known in South African art circles for work that, although in different media, intervenes in the fields of local gender politics and anxieties about the body politic and the politics of the body — this in a country in which, despite guarantees of freedom from discrimination on the basis of sexuality, it remains dangerous to be identified publicly as lesbian, gay, or transgender.¹

Hlobo has had a number of solo shows in South Africa, residencies in the Netherlands and the United States, significant project features at the ICA in Boston, Tate Modern in London, and the Liverpool and Venice Biennales, and has received important prizes (Stevenson 2011 online). His queering of Xhosa custom, alongside an investment in a very particular kind of learned (and archaic) Xhosa vocabulary, register, and idiom, constitutes a not-uncomplicated intervention into the ‘archive’ of Xhosa experience that makes possible a nuanced — though perhaps not uncompromised — examination of the secret histories of black gay men. ‘In my work I explore Xhosa traditions or African traditions, and gender issues, with an emphasis on masculinity and rituals’, Hlobo claims (Perryer 2006 4). The archive, for Hlobo, has subversive and liberatory potential.

Muholi’s work has appeared in a number of solo and group exhibitions in South Africa and, since 2006, in group exhibitions internationally. In 2011 alone, her work could be seen in shows in London, Liverpool, Rome, Basel, Ulm, and San Francisco (Stevenson 2011a online). Her various projects share an obviously archival aim: an effort to gather evidence of, and to bear witness to, the lives of ordinary black women who happen to love and are intimate with other women in a society in which public identification as lesbian makes one particularly vulnerable to vicious sexual assault.

Both artists are concerned with forms of archiving and with the idea of the archive: their deployment of very different visual vocabularies tests the limits of representation and of the representable in their own ways; and their works' subversion of 'tradition', in terms of content and form, offers explicit engagements with matter that is traditionally the subject of the archive — with tradition, memory, senses of autochthony, ideas of indigeneity, structures of kinship and affiliation, and markers of gendered identity. By virtue of their ascent to the status of important international art-world practitioners, artists whose work has found its way into gallery spaces and collections around the world, both artists are, furthermore, responsible for work that is *itself* subject to variously inflected impulses to archive.

I want to consider the pay-offs for invoking questions about what archives that engage with or that *are* forms of 'cultural production' might look like, and how they might be read against the grain. In the bodies of work by these artists, I suggest, we find oeuvres — and 'archives' — that repay the posing of such questions. While there have been a great number of important recuperative and activist archiving projects in the gay and lesbian community in South Africa since the early 1990s², I suggest that art might be regarded as functioning as an intriguing archive of queer affect and queer knowledge, and so constitute or make possible a different kind of gay and lesbian — as well as aesthetic — activism.

ARCHIVES OF ACTIVISM AND AFFECT

Art like Muholi's and Hlobo's speaks to tensions between identity and performance, tradition and contemporaneity, in perhaps more dynamic ways than is allowed by a conventional understanding of archives or archiving (for example, of documents and narratives). Here it is useful to invoke Ann Cvetkovich's suggestion that memories of trauma are not ever only recorded or recovered narratively (in text, or orally) but are associated with 'material artifacts' that 'can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value' (7–8). What might serve lesbian and gay histories and activism most usefully, she argues, is 'a radical archive of emotion' that is able to 'document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism' — in other words, those 'areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive' (241). Cvetkovich relies on Lauren Berlant's positing, in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), of an "intimate public sphere," the result of a process whereby "a citizen is defined as a person traumatized by some aspect of life" in the polity — in Berlant's case, the United States (Cvetkovich 15). In this analysis, Cvetkovich suggests, 'U.S. culture's transformation into a trauma culture' represents 'the failure of political culture and its displacement by a sentimental culture of feeling or voyeuristic culture of spectacle' (15). Seeking to outline an archive of affect that does justice to the polysemous performativity as well as the trauma of gay and, in particular, lesbian lives in North America, Cvetkovich makes the claim

that ‘trauma raises questions’ not only ‘about what counts as an archive’, but also about what counts as a public culture’ (10). If it is affect, ‘including affects associated with trauma’ that serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures’ (10), what does this mean for (some American) queers, she wonders.

South African public culture is saturated with ‘affects associated with trauma’, although the grand narrative of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which dominated the second half of the 1990s, has given way to a multitude of other stories — about xenophobic violence directed by the black poor against poor black migrants from elsewhere in Africa, ‘service delivery’ and the costs of neo-liberal economic policies, and ubiquitous sexual violence. Both Hlobo and Muholi explore the affect associated with these very traumas, inviting attention to that which is elided from new national ‘public-culture’ narratives. It seems to me that they seek variously to rehabilitate an affect that refuses the *spectacularisation*, the rendering spectacular, of trauma, and that speaks metonymically for multiple traumatic experiences occluded by the post-apartheid state. By virtue of their international reputations and their works’ entanglement with institutions (commercial galleries, museum spaces, prize-awarding bodies, biennales), their work also raises questions about the economics of cultural value in a world of neo-liberal capitalisation. They work in different media, but some of their central — and, I argue similar — concerns might be discerned, and the productive energies of considering their work together revealed, if we place a work by each artist in conversation.

Consider first Nicholas Hlobo’s large-scale ‘*Phulaphulani*’ (2008) (fig. 1) exhibited as part of the artist’s second show, *Kwatsityw’iziko*, whose title means ‘crossing the hearth’ and alludes to the approach one spouse makes to the other’s bed in a traditional Xhosa dwelling (Perryer 2009 66–67). Figuratively, according to the gallery’s exhibition notes, ‘[i]n Hlobo’s world of metaphor’, this act of crossing might also ‘[describe] the creative process’ (Stevenson 2008 online). The viewer is invited, once he or she has grasped the title’s multiple connotations, to think about physical crossings and acts of linguistic and artistic translation or transformation. ‘*Phulaphulani*’ engages suggestively with all of these processes: stitches made in embroidery thread suture wounds on the skin of the Fabriano paper (itself technically ‘archival’)³, the seams snaking like the wavy tails of an inverted kite or the tracks of an animal. Hlobo has stitched a piece of rubber inner tube, cut into a vaguely zoomorphic shape evoking a tadpole, or perhaps a spermatozoon, in the lower-right centre of the piece, complete with its own mechanical eye — possibly an aperture for air, perhaps for the return of the viewer’s gaze. In the centre-left of the work, two iPod earphones — perhaps the ears of the animal, or the residue of a mechanical presence — are trapped by tendril-like green and skeletal white stitches that suggest something more obviously organic.

‘*Phulaphulani*’ means ‘listen’ in Xhosa but, as the artist explains, “‘*phula*” is [also] to break. So listening is breaking down information from the source.

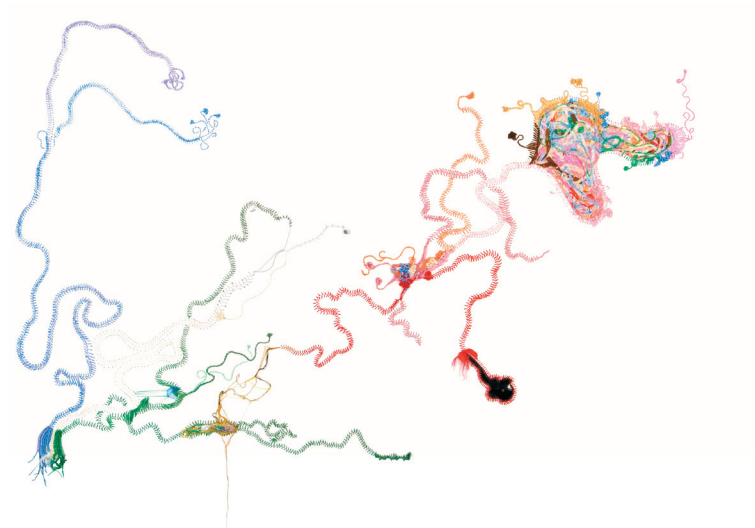


Fig 1. Caption: Nicholas Hlobo, 'Phulaphulani' (2008). Ribbon, rubber inner tube, thread, fabric and iPod earphones on Fabriano paper, 150 x 250 cm (Private Collection, Mauritius). Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.
Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/phulaphulani.htm>>.

You pick what you want, take it apart' (Bosland & Hlobo 31). This work is not obviously *about* queer performativity, but its use of materials and technical abilities associated with the domestic and (traditionally) the feminine offers a challenge to what some Xhosa traditionalists might expect from a man. It might also be noted here how the material presence of this work of art, evoking the language of Louise Bourgeois' fabric works⁴ (Allen 100) as well as the grammar of the cut canvasses of Lucio Fontana (White online), invites the viewer to think about surface and depth, and about the metaphorical possibilities associated with assemblage: where work on paper is conventionally regarded as two-dimensional (even if paper is, of course, three-dimensional), Hlobo has paid attention to the paper's materiality and made it more obviously three-dimensional through the addition of thread, rubber, and iPod earphones. He also clearly 'queers' semantics in his title: the apparent disjunct between *listening* and *breaking* speaks to a struggle in his work between paying homage to tradition, and attending to its contingent and syncretic nature.

Now consider Muholi's 'Aftermath' (2004; also published in Muholi's first collection, 2006 20) (fig. 2), a black-and-white image of an unidentified woman, from her lower torso to just below her knees. The title alone offers little to go on: this woman has clearly been the victim of a trauma, an injury to her body — a viewer's attention is drawn to a long scar that runs vertically down the woman's

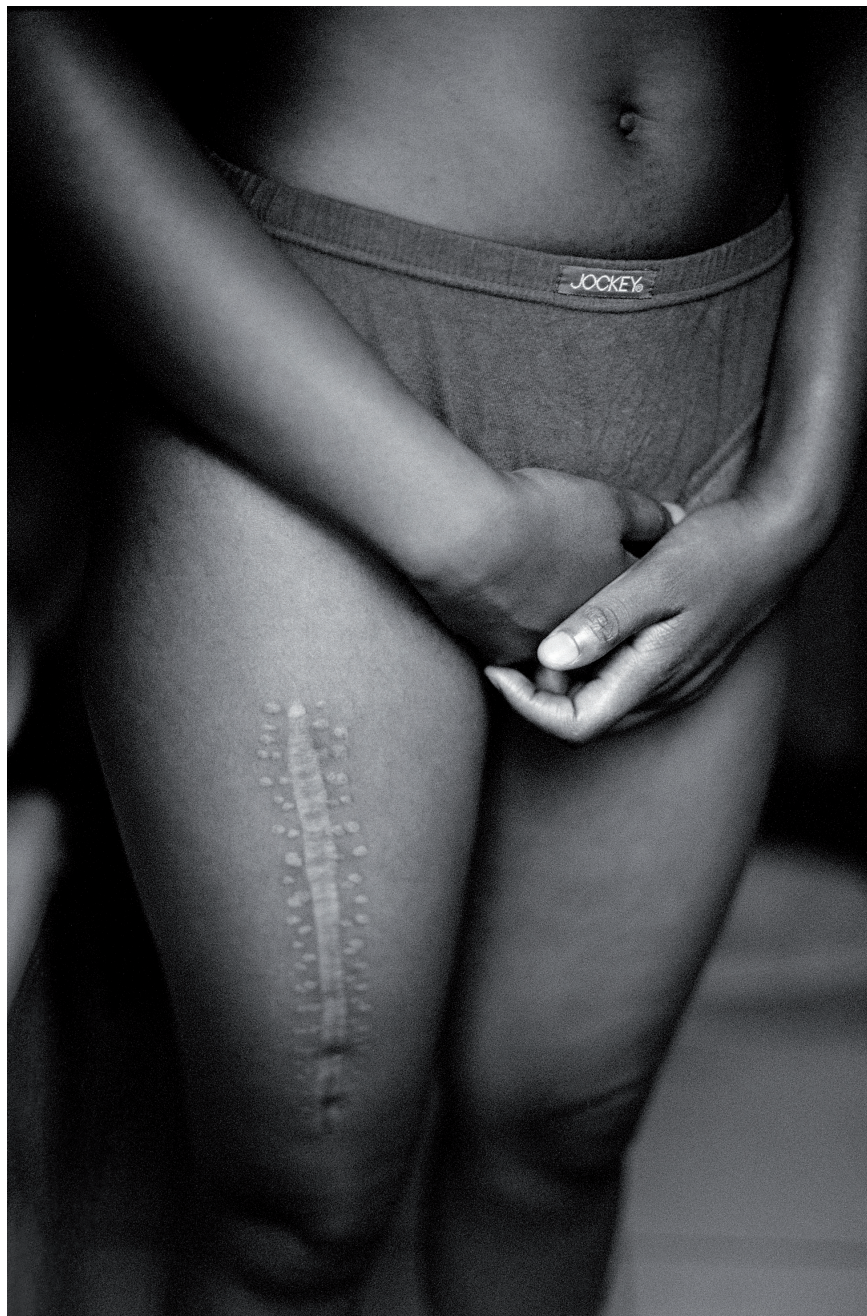


Fig 2. Caption: Zanele Muholi, 'Aftermath' (2004). Silver gelatin print, 600x395mm, edition of 8 + 2AP. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.
Source:<<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/aftermath.htm>>.

right thigh, from a point level with her groin to just above her knee. The 'Jockey' logo on her underwear might be read as signifying in a number of ways (as I have argued elsewhere [Van der Vlies 4–5]). Among other things, it marks the wearer in a transnational circuit of mainstream commodity culture. It also arguably invokes the spectre of the lawn jockey, and the 'Jockey Club', notorious in nineteenth-century Paris for its members exploitation of economically disadvantaged women (Van der Vlies 4–5). When this photograph was displayed in a 2005 photography exhibition entitled *Is Everybody Comfortable*, held at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town, it was accompanied by a more directly instructive text by the artist herself, which read: 'Many lesbians bear the scars of their difference, and those scars are often in places where they can't be seen' (qtd in Günkell 1). This text suggests unseen scars, and here the subject's apparently demure and protective hand gesture hints at what Muholi explains are called curative or protective rapes, perpetrated with depressing regularity against black lesbian women 'in order', Muholi explains, to make lesbians 'into "real" and "true" African women — appropriately feminine, mothers, men's property' (Muholi 2009 online).

The activist content of this photograph and the hidden trauma to which it witnesses was made explicit in a review of Muholi's first solo exhibition, *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture*, held at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in September 2004, which revealed that the subject was a seventeen year-old girl from a township outside Johannesburg, who had been raped by someone she knew (Muholi 2006 91). But as I have argued elsewhere, 'Aftermath' both is and *is not* the photograph of a victim: the subject is not subjected to an invasive gaze that would repeat metaphorically something like the violence to which the photograph — and the scar — attests. The viewer sees neither her genitalia, nor her breasts, and crucially not her face. Her privacy is respected, if not restored, or at least a gesture that insists on the right to expect such is effected and recorded, while her experience is archived. Yet, or because of these gestures, her scars can be read, by virtue of her preserved anonymity, as somehow metonymic, as representative of the scars of others. The dignity with which she is represented renders her an individual, but paradoxically (because she is restored to singularity while also being rendered faceless) one who will *not* be subjected to figuration as a *type* — as she might be were she to be photographed naked, and full-body. There is thus a productive tension between the singularity of the individual rendered other, though not to be objectified, and the type transformed into an allegorical figure, standing for those in the state of similar *aftermaths* (I expand on this in Van der Vlies 2012). As Kylie Thomas puts it: 'The photographs insist on the particularity of the black lesbians they portray at the same time as they insist on their sameness' (434). Desiree Lewis notes that the codes of ethnography and of exotic erotica 'are unsettled as the photographer creates cognitive space for the subjectivity of the woman' photographed (15). In 'Aftermath', Muholi draws our attention to the scar, not to celebrate the scars of the past, but to invite viewers to

be outraged that yet another scar, one that cannot be *seen* has been inflicted; at the same moment, the viewer is also asked to celebrate a tenacity of spirit, and to endorse the right of this woman to love whom she wants.

REPRESENTATION AND THE SEAM

Hlobo has explicitly likened the sutures found in his 'drawings', to processes of 'healing' in post-apartheid South Africa. 'Through stitch', Jessica Hemmings observes, 'he seems to suggest that the damage of apartheid cannot be concealed; rather, recovery should be celebrated instead of being disguised' (41). Hlobo's intention to force our consideration of the mark of the scar, the place of healing that bears witness to the trauma that occasioned it, is not unlike the signifiatory potential of the scar on the thigh of the seventeen year-old rape victim in Muholi's photograph. These works of art are not doing the same work and to read them as conveying 'meanings' that are simply conflated or equated is to do violence to their sophistication and polyvalent suggestiveness. What I am suggesting instead is prompted by the fortuitous congruence of scar-like imagery, and is twofold: that the idea of a suture has metaphoric usefulness; and that representation has also to do with the unrepresentable.

These representations of suturing recall a metaphor that has received much in attention in South African cultural studies over the past decade (and which has perhaps not yet quite reached the end of its usefulness), that of the seam, developed by academic and writer Leon de Kock. Drawing on a passage in Noël Mostert's magisterial study of the centuries-long conflict in the borderlands of the Cape colony (that fall today in the Eastern Cape), and contrasting the idea of the 'seam' (Mostert xv) with that of the purely descriptive 'frontier', De Kock argues that the seam is everywhere in South African writing — although this observation can be productively extended to South African cultural production more broadly. It is to be found in imagery of fissures, frontiers, scars, and in the representation of inequality and conflict. 'To see the crisis of inscription in South African writing following colonization in terms of a "seam" is to regard the sharp point of the nib as a stitching instrument that seeks to suture the incommensurate', he argues (276). Furthermore, De Kock writes, the 'seam' is 'not only the site of difference', but rather 'necessarily foregrounds the representational suture, the attempt to close the gap and to bring the incommensurate into alignment by the substitution, in the place of difference, of a myth, a motif, a figure, or a trope' (276). In other words, the seam marks *difference*, but also *sameness*; it has a utopian impulse, while always also returning attention to the site of the trauma that frustrates that impulse.

If a 'representational seam is the paradox qualifying any attempt to imagine organicism or unity' in South African culture, according to De Kock (277), then for both Hlobo and Muholi the seam *signifies* — that is to say that representations of the seam, as in these particular artworks, *signify*. The representational seam, the point at which the unsayable enters into representation, or at which the difficulty



Fig 3. Caption: Nicholas Hlobo, 'Uzifake zatshon' iinzipho' (2008). Ribbon, rubber, organza and leather on Fabriano paper 152 x 470 x 125 cm (Detail). Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, and Universe in Universe / Magazine / Ampersand [TBC].
Source: Universe in Universe / Magazine / Ampersand. <http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/magazine/articles/2010/ampersand/img/08_nicholas_hlobo>.

of representing traumas or dualities is staged and to which one must compulsively return, is precisely that to which their representations — here, of literal seams — gestures. We might, in relation to the artworks described above, see the following as the equivalent of De Kock's 'representational seam'. In Hlobo's '*Phulaphulani*', the viewer sees the literal suturing of incisions on the paper, a common technique in his paper works — as made clearer in a detail from '*Uzifake zatshon*' iinzipho' (2008c) (see fig. 3). Figuratively, it is also the place where one meaning of the title word (*to listen, to break*) runs into its opposite. In Muholi's '*Aftermath*', the seam is most obviously the

scar at the site where healing, whether it is completed or ongoing, occurs, the site of a wound wrought by the nexus of homophobia and sexual violence; it is not (only) the scar we see on the woman's leg but the scar that is internal, completely hidden from any gaze except the internal one of the subject herself — a scar that gives the lie to the rainbow nation in more ways than one, and stages the depressing repetition of an act of violence that is, in De Kock's terms, always marked by the seam.

MUHOLI'S ARCHIVE: AFFIRMATION AND MOURNING

How does Muholi's work *signify* in the way I have been suggesting? It constitutes itself as an archive of memory, a statement of presence against exclusionary and homophobic cultural nationalism, seeking to be an affirmative record for queer people themselves. It is 'concerned with many of the same issues of visibility and invisibility that have consumed feminist scholarship since the 1970s', Kylie Thomas notes, citing the artist's statement from an exhibition in August 2009 that '[a]s an insider within the black lesbian community and a visual artist', Muholi



Fig 4. Caption: Zanele Muholi, 'Ordeal' (2003). Silver gelatin print, 600 x 395mm, edition of 8 + 2AP. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.
Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/ordeal.htm>>.

sought always to make sure that her 'community, especially those lesbian women who come from the marginalized townships, are included in the women's "canon"' (423). Images from *Only Half the Picture*, some of which were displayed at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004, the Market Photo Workshop, and at Michael Stevenson Gallery in 2006, display this intention — chiefly to record the traumas suffered by black lesbians as in 'Aftermath', but also in work like 'Ordeal', 'Case number', 'Hate crime survivor I' and 'II', and 'What you don't see when you look at me I' and 'II', all 2004 (see Muholi 2006, 15, 20, 16–17, 18, 19, 24, 25). 'Ordeal' (Muholi 2003) displays some of the same complex visual semantics I discussed in relation to 'Aftermath'. The title suggests that something has been endured and overcome — there is no direct evidence of a physical trauma, as in 'Aftermath', although the viewer is invited to make a connection between the woman's activity of washing and an experience she seeks to expunge. My point, which I have elaborated elsewhere (Van der Vlies 7), is that this image, like all of Muholi's

work in this vein, by insisting on anonymity and the non-specific, refuses the grammar of the document. Muholi here does not seek to record the woman in her particularity if that means subjecting her to the gaze of any who might read the photograph as being that (simply) of a naked black woman, available to view and to all that such a view might be thought to entitle the viewer (see fig. 4). Whether or not this framing decision like those which resulted in 'Aftermath' and several other images in this series, assumes a viewer whose gaze *may* likely be tempted into this judgment is a moot point.

Although Muholi is concerned to record and to present, she is also eager to evade spectacularisation because she understands that to do so is, in effect, to erase. Nonetheless, the act of securing — and circulating, displaying, and selling (or allowing to be sold) — representations of these women, is nonetheless not without risk. In one sense at least, the desire to record and to present *polemically* in order to confront the viewer with the fact of black lesbians is a kind of strategically essentialist spectacularisation. Muholi's aim might be considered to be an intentional address to *certain* viewers in particular, viewers like South Africa's Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, who infamously, in August 2009, declined to open an art exhibition on Constitution Hill in Johannesburg that featured Muholi's representation of black lesbians; Xingwana is said to have dismissed the photographs (in a formulation that was widely derided in the progressive media) as 'pornographic' and 'going against nation-building' (Evans 2010 online).⁵

Attentive to what Susan Sontag identified cogently as photography's ready potential to be 'exploitative', and its 'predatory side' (123, 64), Muholi regards it as central to her practice that she treats her subjects — insofar as she knows them all and secures their permission for each and every exhibition and publication of their images — as individuals who demand scrupulous interrogation of the ethical position of the observer-photographer-artist. She seeks always, she claims, to 'establish relationships with' her subjects, many of whom are victims of sexual abuse and violence, 'based on our mutual understanding of what it means to be female, lesbian and black in South Africa today' (qtd in Perryer 2007 64). At each stage in her career to date, the question of audience has been crucial, as has the issue of location and institutional framing; Muholi is keen for her images to be seen, and welcomes such engagements, though she knows that exhibition spaces are not always accessible to those for whom changed attitudes in the community at large would make the most difference (2010a 24). Her caution is also about ongoing safety: *where* the images of black lesbians are seen may have consequences for their safety. In fact, *Faces and Phases*, her most recent project, presents itself in part (as all photography does) as a memorial for several of the subjects who participated in the project and subsequently died or were killed (Muholi 2010b 7). The archival impulse of this aspect of her project could not be clearer.



Fig 5. Nicholas Hlobo, 'Ndiyafuna' (2006). Glass fibre, rubber inner tube, ribbon, jeans, sneakers, lace, wood, 110 x 170 x 100 cm (approximate dimensions).

Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/ndiyafuna.htm>>.

HLOBO'S ARCHIVE: ART AS FETISH

Hlobo's first significant solo show, devoted to his trademark sculptural objects, was *Izele* (2006) (see Perryer 2006). The title refers to birth, and the works shared a concern with genealogy and affiliation, if not always in obvious ways. Liese van der Watt, reviewing the show in the pages *Art South Africa*, noted how its works collectively invited 'conversations about "tradition" and "culture"', yet Hlobo sought to frustrate 'insider readings' of tradition (Van der Watt 69). The 'discomfort' produced by the show's works, she argued, was turned into 'metaphor — metatext even — for identities forged in liminal spaces, that is, on the thresholds and at the boundaries of tradition, ethnicity, culture, sexuality and race' (69). Her meaning is apparent in 'Ndiyafuna' (Hlobo 2006) (see fig. 5). The title means 'I like' or 'I desire' in Xhosa, and in the exhibition catalogue Hlobo explains that he was 'playing with top and bottom, inside and outside' (qtd in Perryer 2006 14). 'Aspects of the work relate to things we know, our particular heritage', he continues: it is, he says, 'as if' the figure in the work has 'decided to go into the bag looking for something. I don't know what this bag contains. This could be a cultural bag. It could be an identity bag' (14).

Hlobo's half-man, half rubber-bag figure seems a creature of liminal space *par excellence*, one either emerging or being swallowed, ingesting or being digested, collapsing the boundaries of the organic and synthetic, the strange rubber sack a cultural goody bag that evokes dangerous auto-erotic asphyxiation. There is an excess of signification, which is alluded to in the title of the exhibition, which might (literally) mean 'someone or something has given birth', but has the additional meaning, according to Hlobo, of 'filling something, or adding to something' (Stevenson 2006 online). Several aspects of the work invite comment here, not least Hlobo's development of a densely layered private system of meaning that draws on a number of semiotic systems: urban youth culture; sado-masochism and gay fetish sub-cultures; and Xhosa tradition, including 'traditional fashion' (Stevenson 2006 online) — he elaborates on the use of pink to suggest not only homosexuality but to evoke the recurrence of the colour in Xhosa beadwork and the use of 'pink pompoms' in the 'headdresses' of the Bhaca people of the Eastern Cape. Rubber suggests 'queerness', he has said, evoking intestines ('the link to man-to-man sex is very strong here'); inner tubes are referred to in Xhosa as '*ithumbi*', the same word for intestine (Hlobo qtd in Perryer 2005 n.p.).

The use of rubber, denim, and lace also suggests something of the fetish. Kopano Ratele suggests that Hlobo's invocation of fetishes inverts the accustomed use of the term: instead of 'finding erotic pleasure in an object or part of a person's body that is not commonly connected to sex', the fetish for Hlobo is 'inverted, directed at evoking something like a sexual experience in others' (Ratele 20–21). I want to foreground what is merely implicit in Ratele's perhaps oversimplified description — the understanding that, for Freud at least, the fetish is primarily a substitute for something whose absence is both recognised and disavowed. 'To put it more plainly', Freud explains, 'the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and — for reasons familiar to us — does not want to give up' (953). Hlobo is interested, even perhaps invested, in absence: the figure in '*Ndiyafuna*' is looking for something; the title of the work itself refers to desire and hence lack. Yet Hlobo seems also to be refusing Freud's linking of homosexuality with the same terror of absence for which the fetish is supposed to compensate, or which it is presumed to displace.⁶ The figure is empowering and without shame; it is simultaneously the object of desire (a half-exposed, *available* male body) and an emblem of *desiring* (the male body exploring something *desirable*), thus evoking, in Hlobo's words, suggestive uncertainty. 'It's playing with the idea of not knowing, the world of the known and the unknown', he explains (qtd in Perryer 2006 14).

Hlobo's use of Xhosa words and phrases to title his works engages with this understanding, almost always subversively. Xhosa, properly isiXhosa, is the second most-spoken home or first-language in South Africa (after [isi]Zulu). Hlobo's studied and consistent insistence on its use for his works' titles effects a self-conscious alienation of the viewer only if the viewer is assumed never to be a

speaker of the language — a point made by Van der Watt in her review of *Izele*: it is ‘a fact that confounds, intimidates and hides its most intimate meanings from its many non-Xhosa speaking’ viewers (69). Joost Bosland, Hlobo’s principal curator at Stevenson, the commercial gallery that represents him, contests the suggestion that language alienates, arguing that Hlobo is always willing to offer elaborations, that he ‘revels in the role of the teacher’ (2009, 110). Given Hlobo’s often highly learned Xhosa, refusing imported words from English or Afrikaans and exploiting the idiomatic nature of the language, his usage might indeed suggest an archival impulse. In his case then, as in Muholi’s, it seems to be an impulse that is not only about preservation of the local and the specific in the face of globalising cultural currents, but also about an active pedagogic impulse. Hlobo explained to Jessica Hemmings that Xhosa had ‘been less respected, hence it never made its way into the high culture and technology in South Africa, whereas English and Afrikaans have been allowed to develop and are in keeping with current global trends and developments in high culture and technology’ (qtd in Hemmings 41). Boston’s ICA offered a useful gloss on Hlobo’s use of Xhosa titles when it hosted a project exhibition in the northern summer of 2008: ‘In the Xhosa vocabulary’, the curators explained, ‘terms are often visually suggested’; ‘[t]he language is loaded with double entendres which Hlobo uses to draw attention to things people are reluctant to discuss openly’ (ICA online). Hlobo’s language ‘overturns prevailing linguistic power structures that aid in shaping the concept of an art gallery, a cultural space largely dominated by white artists and audiences’ (Williamson 2009 132).

I have referred to several instances of Hlobo’s excavation — and queering — of an archive of traditional and linguistic practice, his interest in uncovering moments of ambiguity, places at which one meaning threatens to tip over into another, often with connotations that are subversive of (hetero)normative states or identities. He speaks in interview about being ‘very traditional’ (Bosland & Hlobo 34), but also about the syncretic nature of practices and performances in Xhosa life that are given the status of ‘tradition’. He is clearly aware of the paradoxes involved in claiming cultural affiliations, turning examinations of the porous nature of cultural practice into an exploration both of the elision of queer experience from this archive, but also of the possibilities for its reinscription. So, for example, the exhibition Hlobo staged at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in July 2009, as the recipient of the Standard Bank Young Artist prize, titled *Umtshotsho* which travelled to galleries throughout the country between August 2009 and August 2010), engages with the phenomenon of peer-regulated adolescent societies in traditional Xhosa culture in which mock fights, parties, and non-penetrative sex (*ukusoma*) often takes place between adolescent boys (Stevenson 2009). Hlobo’s family, being Westernised and despising everything to do with ‘the “Red” people, the illiterate *amaqaba*, who smeared themselves with clay and went about naked’, prevented him from having any contact with this culture: ‘I know very little about *umtshotsho*, because I never

went to one', he says (Gevisser 2009 11). The strange, brooding, menacing figures that feature in the installation, constructed from Hlobo's signature rubber inner tubing, ribbons, lace and organza, and called *Izithunzi* ('shadows'), both evoke the syncretism involved in modern 'African' subjectivity, and also gesture productively towards an understanding of the ways in which bodies undergo or are implicated in processes of becoming, of transformation in and through culture, language, and play, how they are disciplined by regimes of the normal — or resist such disciplining. That is to say, Hlobo's figures, largely limbless, unarticulated, nascent assemblages, bodies before or without fixed gender, seem to speak of the somatechnic, 'the mutually generative relation between bodies of flesh, bodies and knowledge, and bodies politic' (Stryker and Sullivan 50).

Colin Richards suggests that Hlobo 'focuses on sexual desire and sexual destiny in a calm, sometimes campish, often amused aesthetic' (251), but I want to suggest that there is much more at stake than this characterisation of the artist as dandy implies. In recent work, Hlobo has continued to explore and interrogate the archive of Xhosa idiom and cultural practice and to probe its interstices for points of queer access that have implications for understanding the borders of the body politic. Large-scale rubber, fabric, and wood sculptures, displayed in increasingly prestigious international art venues, have furthered his examination of the porous boundaries between inside and outside, and extended his visual vocabulary. I have in mind two works in particular, evocations of mythic creatures that also engage with 'becoming-animal' (in the sense theorised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, installations that seek to destabilise gender binaries and regimes of the so-called natural or normal. The first is '*Ingubo Yesiswe*', meaning 'Blanket of the Nation', which formed part of Hlobo's installation (titled *Uhambo*, 'The Journey') at London's TATE Modern (in 2008–2009 [fig 6]).⁷ Trailing for some 30 metres through the gallery space, it was an amorphous assemblage of Hlobo's trademark materials, including rubber, leather, ribbon, furniture and a butcher's hook. Its title refers to the Xhosa ritual in which a cowhide covers a corpse before burial (Greenberg 2009 n.p.). For Greenberg, it is 'like a wounded beast dragging itself forward, weighed down by its accoutrements, including a ball and claw foot — a reminder of the colonial past — and a long tail with bulbous growths', yet it is also vulnerable, with a 'ruptured belly, its innards spilling onto the floor, recalling the ceremonial slaughter of the cow and suggesting discord between the elements' (n.p.).

'*Ingubo Yesiswe*' also evokes a sea creature, as well as Deleuze and Guattari's 'non-productive' 'body without organs' (2004, 8), through which, arguably, it engages with anxieties about queer futurity and reproducibility that are at the heart of many responses to homosexuality and the queer. For Deleuze and Guattari, the 'imageless, organless body' describes the potentiality of the body (imagined virtually), 'perpetually reinscribed into the process of production' (8). And yet we should be cautious about invoking as concrete image these thinkers' metaphor



Fig 6. Nicholas Hlobo, 'Ingubo Yesiswe' (2008). Leather, rubber, gauze, steel, found ball-and-claw chair leg, butcher's hook, chain, 150 x 260 x 3,000 cm (variable).

Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/ingubo2.htm>>.

for desire that resists signification. Perhaps it is more productive to think of how Hlobo seems to engage with their not-unrelated idea of 'becoming-animal', which Marty Slaughter glosses as the process of 'returning to un-organized and dis-organized materiality' (246). Becoming-animal is 'a movement from major (the constant) to minor (the variable) ... in which a subject no longer occupies a realm of stability but is instead folded imperceptibly into a movement ... in flight rather than settled', Gerald Bruns suggests (703–704). In Deleuze and Guattari's own words, '[t]here is an entire politics of becomings-animal ... which is elaborated in assemblages that are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State. Instead, they represent minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions' (2004a 272).

My final example is a work commissioned for the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011 and installed in the 'Illuminazioni' exhibition at the Arsenale, curated by Bice Curiger. Another fantastical creature made from another assortment of found objects, '*Iimpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela*' (Hlobo 2011), a vast sexually indeterminate dragon-like monster hovering menacingly above the gallery floor, dangling its ball-and-claw talons and trailing ribbons, leather and cloth (see fig. 7), offers a more literal 'becoming-animal' and one that attests, too, to the place of sorcery and the fantastic in historical 'becomings-animal' ('It can be said that becoming-animal is an affair of sorcery', Deleuze and Guattari write [2004a

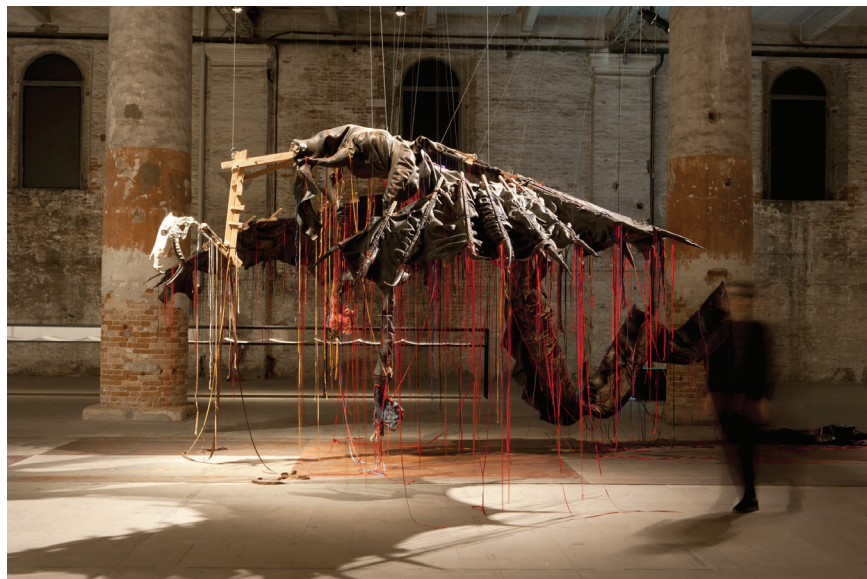


Fig 7. Nicholas Hlobo, 'Iimpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela' (2011). Rubber, ribbon, mixed media, sound, 250 x 460 x 1,000 cm, dimensions variable. Sound recorded by Ndindodwa, Izulu lindila band, duration 23 min 25 sec. Commissioned for the 54th Venice Biennale and installed in the Arsenale. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.
Source: <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/iimpundulu.html>>

272]). The work's title, 'All the Lightning Birds Are After Me', Hlobo is quoted as saying, refers to a Xhosa song about a mythical creature that 'at times presents itself as a bird and at times as a handsome young man, but only to women' (Ruiz online). The point of interest here is that this creature is not one thing; it *presents itself* occasionally 'as a handsome young man', and yet this presentation is merely one instantiation in a plane that is flux, movement, sensation, and potential. To quote Slaughter again, this time on Deleuze's understanding of art: 'Art creates something that is not representation, cliché or a conventional way of seeing things, nor is it the visual equivalent of signification separated from bodies and their desires' (243). This, it seems, is precisely what Hlobo is doing here and in '*Ingubo Yesiswe*'. In both cases, the works' rich suggestiveness, creative re-imagination of gender performativity, and the unsettling of boundaries of all kinds, confirms Hlobo as the artist most likely to produce a South African equivalent of works as expansive and mythically complex as Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle, if potentially more politically nuanced and responsive to local conditions — of production, politics, language — and to the politics of the archive.⁸

What is also noteworthy about '*Iimpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela*' is the work's prominence in the art world's most prestigious biennale, where Hlobo was invited to show in a number of exhibitions completely independently of the South African pavilion. Other of his works were installed in the Palazzo Grassi as part

of an exhibition drawn from the collection of French collector François Pinault, and yet more appeared in a show at the Palazzo Papadopoli associated with the Future Generation Art Prize established by Ukrainian collector Victor Pinchuk. '*Impundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela*' had not been on display for more than a few days when it was announced that it had been purchased (speculation had the price in excess of \$250,000) by German collector Jochen Zeitz, Chairman and CEO of sportswear company Puma (Ruiz; Williamson 2011 101).

At this point it is worth recalling another connotation of Ratele's invocation of the fetish in relation to Hlobo's work. If the artist subverts both the anthropological and Freudian senses of the word, what might be said about the relevance of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism (777)? Marx draws on the language of religion and superstition to suggest that, in bourgeois economies, the commodity is fetishistic because it appears to contain value in itself, so obscuring the processes of labour that have produced it. Hlobo's artworks enter into this mystificatory economy insofar as they become commodities in a field operating not only in terms of symbolic capital, as understood by Bourdieu and others, but large sums of money. Early reviewers commented on the pace at which his paper works sold at his second solo exhibition, while the sculptural works remained unsold (Malcolm 97). But Hlobo has clearly entered a stage in his career in which he is likely to become widely known outside of South Africa and achieve significant commercial success. He is at least self-conscious about the institutions that make this success possible, and their structural similarities with some of those his work subverts. His 2008 exhibition at the ICA in Boston included a performance piece entitled '*Thoba, utsale umnxeba*' ('to lower oneself' in a sign of respect) in which, Pamela Allen reports, 'Hlobo sat on an oval nest of *impepho* (curry bush, a spice used as incense in Xhosa rituals), bowing low every few minutes. This gesture of respect had a sarcastic edge: Hlobo was likely to be recognizing his dependence on the assembled patrons for his continued career success' (Allen 1000).

CONCLUSION

Muholi's projects yield multiple photographs, exhibited in gallery spaces and sold in limited editions (usually eight prints and two artist proofs), though they also lend themselves to reproduction in magazines and newspapers, and publication in monographs — two to date. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the politics or aesthetics of their status as reproductions (though it is worth noting that Muholi has been generous with rights to reproduce works for activist — and academic — reasons). It is also worth noting the difference between photographs and the one-off works produced by Hlobo, affordable only by large corporations and very wealthy private collectors.

The motives of those purchasing works by both are doubtless many: they are more likely, in the case of Hlobo's work, to be investment — monetary, and in the prestige of owning and exhibiting such art. It is impossible to assess the extent to which Afro-pessimism, for example, plays in collectors' interest in this work,

if indeed the work is construed as 'African': Muholi's work certainly attests to the bleak conditions faced by gay and lesbian people in (South) Africa. Hlobo's work might attract anthropological interest, though it would be a collector blind to irony who was not aware of the multiple subversions at play in the work. It is not my intention here to interrogate the uses to which these bodies of work might be put: that is, what purposes they might be made to serve. Because they also exist, even in images that survive the sale of the limited edition prints and the unique sculptural objects, as markers of an activist aesthetic that, despite the differences in media and (conjecturally) in the commercial value of the material objects, evidences an impulse to archive, and to revisit the potential of the aesthetic to be archival — and not merely archivable.

Both Muholi and Hlobo present work that grapples with the idea of (sub/)cultural and personal loss, of mourning, and of anxieties about biological reproducibility that are keenly connected with the idea of community and affiliation (including at the level of nation). I have suggested that Muholi's archival projects are testaments to mourning, as well as records of affiliation outside of the heterosexual family structure. Hlobo has called his drawings his 'gay children' (Bosland and Hlobo 2008), and during a 2007 installation performance entitled '*Amaqanda'am*' he sang (according to the exhibition notes) 'in a loud, wailing Xhosa about how, as a gay man, he is repeatedly told that he will not bear children. In response, his song offers his sculptures as proof that he can give birth to something that will outlast his own time on earth' (Perryer 2007 26). Ann Cvetkovich contends that '[q]ueer or nonnormative forms of cultural reproduction open up possibilities for constructing cultural loss as something other than traumatic or irretrievable loss' (122). Muholi and Hlobo would likely both agree that their art enables cultural revision, cultural gain, and aesthetic production (or, in Muholi's case, technically — and technologically enabled photographic — reproduction) that offers a new archive of affect and affiliation.

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NOTES

- ¹ For general contextualising of gay and lesbian issues in the public sphere in South Africa in the last decade, see Reid 2008 and 2010, pp. 39–44.
- ² See further: Krouse & Berman; Gevisser & Cameron; Morgan & Wieringa.
- ³ Fabriano paper is made from cotton and cellulose, is acid free, and regarded in the art world as ‘archival’.
- ⁴ See Celant further.
- ⁵ See Evans 2010a; Van Wyk.
- ⁶ ‘[T]he fetish ... remains a token of triumph over the fear of castration and ... also saves the fetishist from becoming a homosexual, by endowing women with the characteristic which makes them tolerable as sexual objects’, Freud posits (954).
- ⁷ The exhibition took place in the Level 2 Gallery between 9 December 2008 and 29 March 2009 (see Hlobo 2008a).
- ⁸ Matthew Barney’s five-part cycle, realised between 1994 and 2002, encompassing sculpture, performance, site-specific installation, film and photography, is acknowledged as one of the seminal late-twentieth-century works of multi-generic performance art. See Spector 2003. Pamela Allen also notices the similarities between Hlobo and Barney (2008, 100).

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Gabeba Baderoon

I CANNOT MYSELF

To come to this country,
my body must assemble itself
into photographs and signatures.
Among them they will search for me.
I must leave behind all uncertainties.
I cannot myself be a question.

(Previously published in *The Dream in the Next Body*, Kwela/Snailpress, Cape Town, 2005. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.)

A PROSPECT OF BEAUTY AND UNJUSTNESS

I walk down Heerengracht,
where pigeons dip their necks
like question marks into the fountain.
Then left at Loop, while sun slips

into the sea, and the moon takes its place
above Signal Hill.
Above me, starlings clatter
like typewriters.

Higher still, turning right at Wale,
the seagulls tilt like white kites
against the wind.

I walk on the old silences of the city.

Here is the place on the hill where artists came
for peace, and the view of the harbour.
Below the city reveals itself.
We still walk the neat streets of their paintings.

This prospect from which the city is revealed
was the burial ground of its slaves.
In the beauty of the streets is something
of the private grief of the bodies.

Under the angled mountain, the blue light.
the starlings are cold, but, looking at them,
I see the loveliness
of their chaotic and coordinated hunger.

What can explain
this exact and unjust beauty?

The flock clusters at sunset for warmth and seed.
Poetry cannot be afraid of this.

Sketching the streets, the artists stood
On the burial ground of the city's slaves.
In their paintings, is something
of the private grief of their bodies.

In precise patterns the starlings follow one another
and redouble on their own flight-tracks,
slipstream of warmth,
blood-trace of the self.

Nothing to begin with,
And nothing again.

Around me, the air is thick with history.
Two hundred years ago,
slaves could no longer be sold.

Nothing, and nothing again.

I look again at the painted city, falling
silent at sunset, even the birds stilled.
In the last flash of the sun, the city gleams
white and hard as bone.

(Previously published in *World Literature Today*, July 2008. Reproduced with permission of the author.)

HOW NOT TO STOP

Pa came to collect us from school,
the stern drive home.

Pa sat at the head of the table,
not talking at supper.

Pa stood in the driveway with his back to us,
throwing seed into the wind
with quick slings of the hand, drawing
the pigeons as though he'd called them.

Pa carved his own domino set;
on weekend games sly as chess, slapping
the final piece on the wood table.

Pa drove us home past the house he built,
from which his family was removed in 68,
never looking again in its direction.

Pa bought his leaf tea and hard cheddar
from Queen Bess supermarket
down the street from their old house.

Pa rehearsed how not to stop, not to get out
and walk to the front door he made.

(Previously published in *A Hundred Silences*, Kwela.Snailpress, Capetown, 2006. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.)

I FORGET TO LOOK

The photograph of my mother at her desk in the fifties
has been in my purse for twenty years,
its paper faded, browning,
the scalloped edge bent then straightened.

The collar of her dress folds discreetly.
The angle of her neck looks as though
someone has called her from far away.

She was the first in her family to take
the bus from Claremont
up the hill to the university.

At one point during the lectures at medical school,
black students had to pack their notes, get up and walk
past the ascending rows of desks out of the theatre.

Behind the closed door, in an autopsy
black students were not meant to see,
the uncovering and cutting of white skin.

Under the knife, the skin,
the mystery of sameness.

In a world that defined how black and white
could look at each other, touch each other,
my mother looks back, her poise unmarred.

Every time I open my purse,
she is there, so familiar I forget
to look at her.

(Previously published in *A Hundred Silences*, Kwela/Snailpress, Cape Town, 2006. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.)

THE SONG OF THE HUSBAND

At the University of Cape Town,
in a class on *Troilus and Criseyde*
at 8am on Tuesdays and Thursdays
with the only Black scholar
in the Department of English,
I learned from him
of deathless love and its forgetting.

Years later in the post office he said
I should have left years ago
there was so little time
before my wife died
what is there now

I listened, knowing
he gave to us those years
and some sense of belonging in that place
because he looked like us and wielded Oxford
behind his name, like the armour we all needed.

Today, on the news of his death, I remember
the end always comes too early
and love is both deathless and absurd
the end always comes too early
and love is absurd, yes,
and yet deathless

For Johnny van der Westhuizen

CONCENTRATION

Ahead of me,
a man and a woman walk slowly,
holding each other's waists,
no space between them.

Without warning, they stop.

I can't tell if they are talking,
they are so still, so matched to each other.
He looks thin, her hip is a little behind his.
Then they walk quickly toward the door of their flat,
as though they had used up all the time they had.

Two doors from them, a man with a black and grey beard
is smoking a cigarette outside his door,
watching the couple.
This is his house, his hand against the frame asserts.
When they step inside,
he throws down the cigarette
and grinds it out with his shoe.

Three doors down, a woman in a black scarf
is tapping softly, softly against a white door.
The woman faces the impervious threshold,
not wanting to be looked at.
This is what her body says,
do not look at my solitude.

Then I am at my own doorway,
remembering to turn the lock twice.
There are so many of them here,
my landlady confides,
a concentration.
It's not good.

This is the future,
these closing and opening doors.

MARIA OLAUSSEN

Africa's Indian Ocean in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed*

Yvette Christianë's novel *Unconfessed* approaches the history of slavery at the Cape through the story of Sila, a slave woman incarcerated on Robben Island for the murder of her son Baro. The author's note at the end of the novel places the narrative within a context of the colonial archive in the form of court records which contain the information that Sila was sentenced to death in 1823 but discovered in a Cape Town gaol by the Superintendent of Police for the Cape Colony in 1825. She was subsequently moved to Robben Island and, through the intervention of the Superintendent, granted a full pardon.

Christiansë describes her encounter with Sila's story as an 'accidental and uncanny encounter,' as being 'haunted by a powerful trace of this woman's "voice"' but she goes on to add: 'Or, perhaps as is really the case — that the living long for the dead — I came to haunt her' (*Unconfessed*, A Reader's Guide¹). What Christiansë here refers to as a trace of a 'voice,' the utterance which pulled her to the story, consists of one single word in the public record which is believed to have been uttered by the accused, the Dutch word *hertseer*.

What pulled me? It was that trace, the word that all the official documents seemed unable to resist — that single Dutch word, *hertseer*, which the English translated directly into 'heartsore.' Not 'grieving' or 'griefstruck,' but this forceful, corporeal, 'heartsore.' I believe it to be the one real word she uttered when the prosecutor outlined and demanded that she confirm her act. She uttered one phrase, 'Yes, because I was heartsore.' Frustrated, he asks again, 'Is it true, that on the night of...' The record shows just that one word as her response. (*Unconfessed*, A Reader's Guide n.p.)

The significance of this utterance, framed as an author's discovery, lies in its potential to disclose an alternative history of the settlement of the Cape. In contrast to the dominant narrative of European conquest, this history gestures towards Africa's Indian Ocean connections and it contains traces of a different kind of transnational movement than the one determined by a Europe-Africa dichotomy.

Unconfessed tells the story of a woman, born in Mozambique, who is enslaved and brought to the Cape as a young girl. There she passed into the hands of different slave-owners and later was sold specifically for her child-bearing capacity. She struggles to gain freedom for herself and her children but she ends up in an increasingly violent and oppressive situation where she kills one of her sons, Baro. She is sentenced to death but remains in prison where she is forced to perform sexual services, until she is discovered by the superintendent of police and

moved to Robben Island to serve a prison sentence instead of the death sentence. Here she is approached by a minister's wife who urges her to confess the crime of *kindermoord* [infanticide] and convert to Christianity. Sila refuses to confess and it is this act of refusal which determines the title and the narrative structure of the novel.

While *Unconfessed* opens in the prison in Cape Town with the efforts by the prison authorities to explain Sila's situation to the newly appointed Superintendent of Police, the novel consists mainly of Sila's memories, which often take the form of an address to her dead son Baro, whom she imagines approaching her during weekly visits to Robben Island. These memories are represented in circling movements which draw closer and closer toward the death of Baro. As Meg Samuelson shows in her reading of the novel, 'Christiansë undertakes a double conjuring act in her novel, *Unconfessed*: she both salvages the slave woman Sila from her sentencing in the colonial archive, and then allows her to summon back the son that she had killed' (Samuelson 2008 41).

In this reading of *Unconfessed* I want to focus on instances where Sila articulates the possibilities for a life of freedom for herself and her children and I argue that these instances are inspired by the forms of assimilation and settlement that took place in communities across the Indian Ocean rim. The narrative is, however, determined by a different historical context, one in which slavery at the Cape was only a starting point for colonialism and racial segregation. *Unconfessed* tells the story of how Indian Ocean transnational movement developed into a history of global settlement based on the racial dichotomy of the Atlantic Ocean.

Slavery at the Cape was an integral part of the first settler societies, when employees of the Dutch East India Company brought slaves to the Cape as part of their households. As historians of Indian Ocean slavery have pointed out, European traders were latecomers to the networks of trade across the Indian Ocean and they adopted both the navigational expertise and the social structures of the societies that they encountered. Slavery as it later came to be practised at the Cape between 1652 and 1838² evolved out of the highly complex and historically varied forms of human bondage developed over thousands of years across the societies of the Indian Ocean rim.³ Slaves were brought to the Cape from 1652 to 1808. In the early years slaves came primarily from the Eastern possessions of the Dutch East India Company but with the first British occupation of the Cape in 1795 until the banning of the slave trade in 1808, most slaves were brought from Mozambique and other parts of the east coast of Africa (Shell 1994; Machado 2004).

In comments on slavery by European travellers to the Cape in the 1790s, during the first British occupation, there is a particular interest in the lack of a clear distinction in physical appearance between the Dutch settlers and their slaves (Barnard, Barrow, Sparrmann) within their descriptions of Dutch settler society as backward, inefficient, patriarchal and cruel. The ideals of progress and enlightenment through individual freedom and law and order are here clearly directed at a competing system of power and authority represented by the Dutch,

not as another European power, but as a manifestation of an Indian Ocean heritage about to be displaced. The movement from the position of slave or other dependant to that of a slave-owning settler and vice versa, which characterised Indian Ocean societies and which was practised at the Cape through a variety of complex systems ranging from marriage to concubinage and sexual abuse of female slaves, gained an entirely new meaning through the introduction of racial taxonomies and the idea of miscegenation. The geographical, social and reproductive movement of people for thousands of years was suddenly described in terms of shame and degeneration with clear cut distinctions between the movements of the Europeans as settlers and the Africans as slaves. This process of racial determination was articulated alongside ideas of individual human freedom and both were seen to represent superior European ideals from which the Dutch settlers, interestingly enough, were excluded.

A re-orientation of the historical perspective on slavery at the Cape towards the Indian Ocean World would take into consideration the fact that the slave routes across the Indian Ocean 'along with those across the Sahara, were of far greater antiquity than those across the Atlantic, and the total number of African slaves transported across the Indian Ocean and Sahara probably exceeded that carried across the Atlantic' (Allen 36–37). This shift of focus would also, as Gwyn Campbell argues, change our view of the historical and global role of Africa and challenge 'conventional views of who constitutes an "African" [away from] "essentialist"' and 'ahistorical concepts of ethnic, linguistic and cultural "purity"' (Campbell 2010 174).

In its articulation of these shifting paradigms from the Atlantic world to the world of the Indian Ocean,⁴ *Unconfessed* calls into question the reliability of the colonial authorities' documentation and creates a protagonist whose only strategy is a refusal to play the role assigned to her in the construction of the written records surrounding the case: she refuses to be reduced to a slave and criminal. A significant aspect of this refusal concerns Sila's opposition to the tropes and figures of death and resurrection, legitimacy and heritage, informed by a Eurocentric tradition of Christianity which determines the position of her and her children as outsiders. The story evolves instead through the trope of haunting, creating a disconnection to the colonial archive but also, through the presence of the dead son, Baro, a different trajectory into the future. It is within the story that Sila offers to Baro that the traces of Africa's Indian Ocean connections can be found.

Through its literary exploration of archival material on slavery, Christiansen's novel shows similarities with Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). The story of infanticide, present as historical events only through court records, is in both novels evoked through the experiences of the slave woman having to come to terms with the past. In both novels the dead children are present in the narratives, although the character *Beloved* takes on a much more tangible presence than the dead son Baro in *Unconfessed*, and both authors thereby disregard perceived

ideas of truth in realist fiction in favour of the version of events experienced by the mothers. Both narratives are formed through the relation between mother and child and, in different ways, as stories of failed confessions. In *Beloved*, Sethe tries to explain her actions to her daughter, who becomes increasingly demanding and violent, refusing to understand or forgive her mother's action, while in *Unconfessed*, as the title suggests, the protagonist refuses to participate in both legal and religious acts of confession but instead explains her actions to her dead son and in this way changes the context and the terms of the act of confession and absolution. Another point of similarity between *Beloved* and *Unconfessed* is their setting in a time leading up to the abolition of slavery and the function of abolitionist discourse in the novels.

What the evocation of *Beloved* suggests, however, is that present day expressions of the Indian Ocean history of slavery find themselves in a complex relationship with the dominant Atlantic paradigm through which issues of slavery and freedom in transnational encounters have been most often represented. *Unconfessed* is not so much concerned with the colonial archive as a source of information about the slave as it is a narrative of the processes of enslavement. In this respect Sila's story points to a different historical and geographical context than that of *Beloved*, and, to the difficulties of representing the history of slavery and freedom, it also points to the problems inherent in finding expressions for Africa's Indian Ocean connections. *Unconfessed* focuses on the future rather than the past and it is through a concern for her children and her despondency when it comes to securing their rights as children of a free woman that Sila's narrative engages with a racialised order to come. The possibility of a life of freedom is only approached in retrospect as a failed dream, a dream not of taking the place of the slave owners but of joining the community of Muslims of the Bo Kaap. The title *Unconfessed* gestures towards a double inscription where Sila's narrative comes to constitute both a refusal to confess and a confession directed beyond the authorities that demand it. In this refusal, Sila also establishes her relation to her dead son and what she sees as his agency as equally valid and powerful as the written records by the authorities which constitute the present day archives on slavery at the Cape.

ARCHIVES, MEMORY, WRITING

In Robert Ross' study, *Cape of Torments* (1983), the question of how to represent slavery at the Cape as a historian is approached through a focus on the limitations of the colonial archive. As other historians and scholars of Cape slavery have pointed out, not only are there no slave narratives that draw on ideas of authenticity and autobiographical testimony as in the Atlantic tradition drawing on ideas of authenticity and autobiographical testimony, but the archival material concerning slavery and slave resistance consists of legal documents where the voice of the slave is often represented in terms of the confession to a crime.⁵ What Ross terms 'the material deposit' of slave life at this period consists of the records of the

Court of Justice in Cape Town covering the period of Dutch East India Company rule, now deposited at the Algemeen Rijksarchief in The Hague. Ross describes the procedures through which the words of the slave — obtained through interrogation and normally translated from Malay or Portuguese into official Dutch of the courtroom — was presented to the Court of Justice only in writing. These statements as well as those later obtained during the British dispensation and deposited in the Cape Archives Repository contain the few material remnants of statements derived from slaves at the Cape; and, as Ross points out, even in these records the words of the slaves are present only indirectly.

Christiansē's novel explores this silence in the archival records as part of a set of practices that resist the dominant context of confession-absolution, rather than producing a story that would take up the position of the missing slave narrative. As Meg Samuelson argues, 'Christiansē shifts attention from Sila to the law that produces her first as a slave and then as criminal subject' (Castaways and Generations 14). In her reading of the novel in connection with Christiansē's poetry collection, *Castaway*, Samuelson identifies 'a methodology of salvage and haunting — or, more accurately, salvage as haunting — as that which is rescued from the wreckage of history is recycled as troubling recurrence in our present' (2). In this reading of what Samuelson identifies as multidirectional haunting across generations — 'a mother is in communion with her dead son in *Unconfessed*, while in *Castaway* the authorial persona is visited by her dead grandmother' (3) — the emphasis is placed on Sila's struggle against her inscription into the colonial archive.

We are asked not to join the minister's wife in probing 'How could [she] do it?' this is not the question the novel seeks to answer. Instead, in the absence of confession, we are asked to consider how *kindermoord* as archival trace and literary trope functions in this text. In what ways does this unspeakable, unconfessed act speak, and what might it articulate? (Castaways and Generations 14)

It is thus in opposition to what Robert Ross has described as the 'exceedingly voluminous (and, exceedingly verbose) mass of source material' (7) in the colonial archive that Christiansē writes a story that does not seek to represent the voice of the slave. Sila's scepticism towards record keeping is expressed directly in statements such as: 'I have had enough of that speech that travels on paper' (211) as well as in her focus on the power structures that she finds herself in:

I have been trying to understand what it means for someone like me around people like these — and I mean the guards, the warden, the ministers and their wives, the judges, the field cornets, governors who come and go, the wives, the doctors, the king. I mean this great weight of masters and madams is like a wave that comes and comes. When such a wave breaks it is on backs like mine. I am tired of them and fear that wherever I go they will follow and make me believe they have always been there. I fear that no matter how far I travel into that land, my children, will end up like me. (334)

What this passage also illuminates is the connection that Christiansë establishes between Sila's story and the fate of future generations. The foreboding about the future in this passage also contains Sila's observations about the intersection of language and power structures where she has a clear and pessimistic view of her own place. As Bhekizizwe Peterson argues: 'Underlying the archive is the aim of ordering the past as inheritance (Peterson 29). In this sense, the slave woman's relation to the archive will always be determined through an act of exclusion extended onto future generations through the slave matronymic, according to which children born to slave women, regardless of the status of the fathers, were always enslaved.

The narrative structure of *Unconfessed* moves in circles towards the incident where Sila, already legally a free woman, is sold to the farmer Van der Wat, together with her children, among them her son Baro. Although Sila is regularly raped by Van der Wat and also bears his children the incident which leads to Sila's killing of her son Baro is set off by a scene where Baro, in front of important guests, imitates Van der Wat's youngest son calling his father 'pappa' (257). The punishment inflicted on him by Van der Wat is so terrible that Sila decides to 'protect' her son in the only way she is capable of, that is by killing him. Baro's enunciation of the forbidden patronymic is, in Sila's narrative, only expressed indirectly through a reference to the expression used by Van der Wat's son. It is as if Sila, in moving slowly towards this incident, sees this word when expressed by Baro as invested with such a destructive force that she cannot bring herself to include it in her narrative.

This incident, articulated partly as an absence, stands at the centre of Sila's story. It structures the narrative by offering an explanation of her state of imprisonment and her refusal to confess, and it forms the turning point in a story about motherhood in a time when the meaning of freedom and bondage is rapidly shifting. The novel traces a trajectory of changing household forms, from a situation with several layers of bondage and dependence where women and children would all find themselves in a position of subservience to a male head of household, towards households which were allegedly based on ideas of individual freedom. As Robert Ross points out: 'The master also had the right, as head of the household, to inflict corporal punishment on his slaves, just as he could on his wife and children. Only when the norms of domestic correction were exceeded did this turn into a criminal offence, and in practice the boundary of what was permissible was drawn at the survival of the victim' (33). Baro's imitation of the slave-owner's son can only constitute a crime worthy of severe punishment in a situation where the officially acknowledged son and heir has a different relation to the father as head of household than the son of a slave woman. In situations where all dependents are encouraged to refer to their ruler as father and see him as a benefactor, the difference between the sons would not be expressed as an interdiction in relation to the patronymic.⁶

Baro is thus doubly excluded from the colonial archive. Through Sila's refusal to confess, there is no story about the killing of the son and through the slave matronymic he has no claim to the inheritance of the slave owners. It is in this space that the haunting takes place. The paradigmatic shift between the Indian Ocean World and one determined by the Black Atlantic also involves a shift in ideas of ancestry and heritage as well as of the techniques and the significance of archival records. In Derrida's *Archive Fever*, the creation of history, tradition and culture is placed within a context of a public/private divide where the archival material is linked to the creation of the domestic sphere which also, at the same time, represents a publicly recognised authority: 'It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place' (2). Derrida's discussion moves around what he terms a 'Freudian impression' and involves the reiteration of patriarchal structures of traditional Judaism with the elements of psychoanalytical concepts derived from family forms based on a public/private divide. Linked to the production of memory, these impressions concern the physical act of writing, the figures of suppression and repression and their link to the future, as well as the question of legitimate heirs. In Derrida's text, the spectre is present through intergenerational haunting as a figure which commands authority but also as a symptom of absence of memory and archive.⁷ This function of haunting is used in *Unconfessed* when Baro himself and the act that Sila has committed both remain within the sphere of that which cannot be archived. Sila's concern for the future of her children also attests to what she sees as the function of the archival records as delimitations of the possibilities of freedom.

In Sila's gestures towards future archives she includes the very tangible results of the work slaves perform in breaking stones on Robben Island: 'The stones we break loose from the island are bits of the future we give to that growing town across the water' (48). This information is part of the story she tells about her life to her dead son Baro and here she connects her own present location to the future stones and walls of Cape Town as well as to written records kept by the prison authorities:

And when you walk away from the edge, if you keep the water at your back and walk a straight line from this point where you found me, you will go by the place where I break stones for Cape Town's streets and walls. Yes, even women break stones here.

The warden must count each stone and write the number in a book and in that book he must also tell the superintendent of police how it is with all of us who live here. We are in the same book as the stones. Rounders. Oblongs. Squares. Pounders. (45)

By including the buildings and streets of Cape Town in the archives of slave labour⁸ and connecting them to the written records by the prison authorities which in themselves constitute and inscribe the subject as prisoner, Christiansē suggests that the written archive is part of the prison that Sila needs to escape rather than a point of origin and possibilities. The novel illustrates the trajectory of the archival material discussed by Achille Mbembe as 'fragments of lives and pieces of time' moving towards their role as part of public institutions (19). Mbembe further

identifies the documents in the public archive as characterised by their material status as well as an imaginary function: 'Through archived documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end' (21). Christiansë's novel challenges this function of the archive, identified by Samuelson as a 'teleological temporality' (Castaways and Generations 3), by making Sila resist all attempts by the authorities to explain her deed or to participate in an act of confession. The novel is thus not concerned with versions of voices or alternative stories but with interrogating the very foundations of such projected purposes of the material deposits of the past.

This resistance is particularly evident in the novel's treatment of death. In Mbembe's theory of the archive, death is a prerequisite for what he terms co-ownership: 'the feeling that we should all be heirs to a time over which we might exercise the rights of collective ownership' (21). For this right to be established, Mbembe argues, the author of the document is dead and can only be 'woken from sleep and returned to life' at a point in time when the archival material can be consulted. In *Unconfessed*, the 'salvage as haunting' that Samuelson has identified in the novel, stands in direct opposition to the theme of death and resurrection/confession and absolution that underlies the process through which archival material makes stories possible. These figures also underline the link between this coding of the past and the tradition of Christianity which came to be predominant at the Cape and which is also thematically foregrounded through the character of the Minister's wife in the novel.

Christianity is thus present as a disturbing reality from the very beginning of the novel. The fact that Christian mission stations acted as places of refuge for slaves is acknowledged by Sila in her narrative but the historical context is enlarged to include her premonitions of a future where the interests of landowning farmers predominate.

Mina says there are good ministers who are collecting the purchase price for children and old men and women, and they set these people free.

Where do they go then?

She says they go to a farm inland, near the winegrowers of Stellenbosch. Am I stupid? Do you think those farmers will let good hands sit idle? I am not so stupid that I cannot tell a thorn in my foot when I feel it. (69)

Sila's story is made possible through contradictory processes of a refusal to confess to the living and to the future and by turning to the dead in the form of the son she has saved from that future. The theme of haunting allows for a process of simultaneity where Sila's story exists in spite of the efforts of the authorities to extract their version from her. The haunting in *Unconfessed* gestures towards the future where Sila's descendants, as she predicts, are unable to escape the oppression and degradation of which slavery was only a starting point. But the novel

also contains fragments and traces of an Indian Ocean version of global movement and change, one that has been silenced by the strategies of European expansion.

VISIONS OF FREEDOM AND HOPE

Although Sila tells her story from a position of deep despair and a prophetic vision of the racialised oppression of future generations, the novel ends with the possibility of hope. In a postscript, a third person narrator addresses the reader directly: 'You want to know. What happened to her?' (341) and goes on to offer different scenarios about the ending of Sila's story of which the last is a happy ending. 'There are wishes: a child of a child came, a guard swallowed astonishment and lost his heart and she hers — hah! — a quiet freedom in the shadow of Signal Hill. Perhaps she would say, wishes are sometimes just stories that have nowhere to go' (341).

These are the very last words of the novel and they suggest more than the reader's presumed wish for closure, knowledge and a happy ending. These words encourage the reader to revisit the very few but significant moments in Sila's narrative where she stresses her status as a free woman and plans where she and her children would spend their days in freedom. These moments are significant because they place the narrative within the context of Indian Ocean slavery of which the slave trade and slavery at the Cape was a part, and they gesture towards an alternative but disappearing history of slavery and assimilation that would open up a possibility of a free movement between the position of settler and slave, at least across generations.

The question of origin is addressed from the very beginning in *Unconfessed*. The novel opens with the superintendent entering Sila's cell in the prison yard and asking her to confirm that she is the 'Sila van den Kaap, slave to the burgher Jacobus Stephanus Van der Wat' (2). Sila's objection to this way of describing herself is based on the fact that she was fraudulently kept in slavery after having been manumitted in the will of her late owner and in her answer, 'I am Sila who was taken from Cape Town to Van der Wat' (3), she also refuses to use the slave name 'van den Kaap' as a designation of her place of origin. Only later in the novel is she described as a 'Mozbieker slave girl' (10) and traces of her efforts at reconstructing memories of her childhood in Mozambique become intermixed with the dream world she conjures up on Robben Island.

Perhaps, if we had been able to run from Van der Wat's farm... perhaps if we had found and followed the land's edge we too might have come back to the place from which I had been taken as a girl. If there had been someone to tell me these things... (45)

This identification of the slave as African and not of the Cape marks the beginning of a different idea of slavery and freedom than that which was predominant in the Indian Ocean World. It denies Sila the possibility of finding a home at the Cape in a process of movement between ethnicities and degrees of dependence and bondage and fixes her as African in opposition to the European settlers and

slave owner and thereby marks the end of the Cape as part of the Indian Ocean World. The story that Sila recounts to Baro is therefore already determined by this outcome of racial dichotomies where she and her offspring are doomed to a life of subservience. The story can therefore only contain traces of different possibilities and a different outcome as embedded in the structures of Indian Ocean slavery.

One of the most important aspects of these structures as depicted in the novel concerns the fact that the relation between slave and slave owner was played out within a hierarchical extended family consisting of the male head of household and his dependents.⁹ The very real possibilities of freedom that Sila keeps returning to in her narrative are to be secured through the goodwill of her owners as long as they remain capable of keeping their promises. The first owners she is brought to as a young girl, the Neethlings, have to sell their slaves due to economic difficulties. It is significant that the destitution that she and her fellow slaves experience due to Minister Neethling's drinking is part of a disintegration of the entire household, starting with the selling of the grown slave woman 'that all the children had to call Ma' (9). In this incident it is not only the slaves who are helpless:

Standing at the end of the road to the farmhouse, Sila tried to see Ma go, but the sun was in her eyes. She heard Ma calling out of the ball of light that seemed to dance around the cart, but what was called was lost because of Missus Neethling's terrible wailing back in the house and Minister Neethling's loud praying. (10)

Sila's enslavement then follows a trajectory characterised by the cruelty and greediness of slave owners set against the ineptitude or helplessness of those who feel responsible for the well-being of slaves in their household. Her next owner, Hendrina Jansen, a widow called *Oumiesies*, turns out to be as helpless as the Neethlings. She draws up a will ensuring freedom for all her slaves after her death and fights her son, Theron, who tries to lay claim to the slaves during her lifetime. In spite of Jansen's will, all the slaves, except a literate slave woman, Spaasie, end up enslaved to Theron after *Oumiesies*' death in 1806. In recounting her story to Baro, Sila dwells on the possibilities of a life at the Neethlings or at *Oumiesies*:

Sila tried to think of a life that might have been if only Missus Neethling had kept her promise and resisted her drunken husband. They would all have stayed together.

(31–32)

If *Oumiesies* had lived, *Oumiesies* for whom the world was her god's test, Sila knew they would all have been happier. She would have taken good care of *Oumiesies*. (32)

What these fantasies suggest is that Sila sees slavery within the context of these households as radically different from what she later comes to experience when the economic value that she and her slave children represent determine their future. In these visions of the future, Sila, her children and her fellow slaves are not commodities to be bought and sold but members of a household with clear hierarchies and power structures where women and children find themselves subservient to male heads of the household. As Joseph Miller points out,

Women's gendered exclusion from the modern public realm of highly commercialized and legally framed forms of slaving that developed in the eighteenth century in the New World, centered on plantations and mines, developed in parallel with, and eventually replaced, the millennia-long, continent-spanning, positioning of women, children, and others in private households centered on patriarchal extended families.

(Miller 2007 xv)

Sila's wish to remain within the slave-owning household must therefore be understood within the context of the Indian Ocean World prior to the imposition of a public/private divide where all human relations were organised within complex domestic arrangements 'in which dominant men surrounded themselves with women of many origins outside the group, including some acquired through capture or purchase, that is, as slaves' (Miller xv–xvi). As Miller points out, this reality stands in opposition to 'the stereotypical modern image of slaves [as] male, men imagined as toiling from sunup to sundown in fields and canebrakes, subject to sale at any time for the financial advantage of their owners' (Miller xv–xvi). What Christiansē's novel describes are the changing ideals of domestic households as well as the commodification of slaves within a system of commercialisation. The last 'patriarchal' household that Sila experiences is headed by a woman, *Oumiesie*, and it is through her death and the treachery of her son, Theron, that Sila's status as chattel slave is determined. It is also within this context that the status of slave differs markedly from that of other female dependants.

In Theron's household Sila is sexually abused by Theron, bears several children and holds the position of Mother also to Spaasie's children whom Theron refuses to set free. This household also disintegrates when Sila is sent to work for Hancke, and from there is sold to Van der Wat together with her children, of whom the eldest are then sold away from her despite her desperate fight to keep them. Throughout her narrative Sila returns to the fact that neither she nor any of her children could legally be enslaved after being manumitted in *Oumiesies'* will: 'My children are the free children of a free woman' (300). In legal terms the slave matronymic regulates the slave status of children born to slave women, disregarding the fact that many of them were the offspring of free men, often the slave owners themselves. In Sila's case, the opposite should also apply and all children included in *Oumiesies'* will as well as those born to her after her manumission were legally free.

Sila's story contains subdued elements of the possibilities of reconstructing an Indian Ocean experience of transnational movement where the position of slave and settler would not be fixed or determined for future generations. Her dreams of inclusion in a large household of benevolent slave owners should be understood in this context. In these dreams of returning or remaining on the farms of the Neethlings or *Oumiesies*, Sila's main concern is for her children and the children of other slave women that she sees as her responsibility. Freedom is, in Sila's narrative, always expressed in relation to her children, 'the children of a free woman', but this should not be taken as an indication of a domestic ideal

but rather as an insistence that the law be applied. In this respect, as Samuelson argues, Sila's story contains premonitions about future structures of bondage which replaced those that were removed through the abolition of slavery. As Ross Worden shows, the slave matronymic was not respected in cases where this would have ensured freedom for children of slave women:

Children born to slave mothers after 1834, who by law should have been free, were indentured until the age of 25. No preparation for freedom was forthcoming: in contrast to the other slave colonies, the Cape apprenticeship system made no provision for education (However rudimentary), granted no overtime pay and imposed more severe restrictions on movement and rights of complaint than had existed in the final years of slavery. (Worden 2005 42)

It is against the background of these and subsequent legal restrictions on the freedom of former slaves, as well as the introduction of further racialised limitations to the possibilities of full citizenship, that Sila's hesitations about the promises of abolition and her resistance to the act of confession within existing power structures should be understood.

Despite her misgivings, she nevertheless thinks about how and where she and her children would live if granted their freedom and these thoughts concern two very specific places; the Bo Kaap or a Mission Station. Both places come with their own separate histories and Sila is determined not to be tricked into further dependence under the guise of freedom. In Sila's narrative the possibility of settling in the Bo Kaap is connected to the efforts made by Spaasie, who managed to assert her right to freedom stipulated in *Oumiesies'* will.

The superintendent will come and Pedder will have to say sorry and I will set off from this place. I will say Lys must come too. It is the price I ask for all those years that the Orphan chamber did nothing for me and mine. And I will go and find Camies and tell him, you see, your mother never forgot you. Perhaps I will get a small house up there in the Bo Kaap, on Signal Hill where the gun goes off each day to tell us it is noon. (93)

There is no mention of Islam as a religion here but Sila refers to a Muslim diviner in another context where she is intent on finding answers to her dreams about the future. In the novel, the Bo Kaap functions as a brief and fleeting indication of the Indian Ocean origins of the persons who were brought to the Cape as slaves and of the existence of Muslim religious communities. Ross points to the fact that Muslims were brought from Indonesia from the very beginning of European settlement of the Cape:

Throughout the period of VOC rule, the Cape was used as a penal colony, in which undesirables, frequently the enemies of the Dutch in the East, were kept from endangering the profits of the East India Company in the Indonesian archipelago. The political exiles at the Cape were generally aristocrats and often learned Islamic teachers. In time they came to furnish the first Imams of the Cape Muslim community as this developed among the slaves and their descendants from the 1780s on. (20)

It is through this history of movement across the Indian Ocean where the previously powerful and privileged find themselves in positions of deprivation and dependence that the traditional image of the slave is given a new meaning. Whereas slave narratives in the Atlantic tradition build on the idea that learning and freedom are granted to the slaves through the intervention of Europeans, while at the same time using autobiographical conventions and authenticating frame narratives to show that these stories are told by the slave, this Indian Ocean heritage of learned and powerful convicts has found its way into the colonial archive only through court records.¹⁰ According to Gabeba Baderoon, 'Christiansē drew on two decades of research into the archives of the Cape Colony. Journals kept by slave ships recount the raiding and slave-buying expeditions to Mozambique and only emphasize that the views of slaves are almost irretrievably absent in the historical record' (2009 95). The presence of Islam in Cape Town therefore functions beyond the archival conventions of the European powers as well as the mechanisms of subject constitution determined by abolitionist ideals of conversion, confession and individual freedom. As Baderoon further points out, 'Under the statutes of India through which the Dutch governed the Cape Colony, the public practice of Islam was punishable by death, so Islam survived through hidden practices of subversion by slaves, shaping communal relations, language and food rituals that survive among descendants of slaves even today' (2009 92). In South African official history, the presence of descendants of slaves in the Bo Kaap was constructed through an essentialising idea of the Cape Malay as picturesque which served to gloss over the complex history of settlement and slavery and the existence of communities other than those of the European settlers.¹¹ In contrast to Rayda Jacob's novel *The Slave Book*, where the communal practices and the presence of Islam are central, Sila is not part of the global community of the *Ummah*. Her knowledge of the Bo Kaap is, however, severely restricted by her life as prisoner on Robben Island and the predominance of Christianity in that context and never remains more than a fleeting reference to a possibility of what might have been.

As the chronology of the story leads up to the emancipation of the Lodge slaves in 1828, the emancipation of all slaves in 1834 and the end of the apprenticeship period in 1848, Sila's narrative becomes increasingly involved with the past as well as with visits from those who have passed away. Sila sees her power and her possibilities in this spiritual world, where she comforts those who have escaped slavery through death and takes revenge on the slave owners.

I *am* a small boat bobbing just there off Cape Town, there at Roggerberg. I have come to pick up Hester and her babies. She walked into the water with her children so that they would escape this country. But cruelty of cruelties, she and one child were pulled free of the water. They punished her, as they wanted to punish me.

For women it is different. Two men get hold of a piece of rope. They call it strangulation. For men it is hanging. (76)

I will call up bad things and send them there and they will crawl into Van der Wat's ear and scream at him until he runs into a wall, head first, until he breaks his head open the way he broke our lives. (40)

Sila's visions also include dancing and flying away from Robben Island and in these visions of the future she reaches out to her son Baro. Most importantly, however, these visions are interspersed with her preoccupation with the past, a concern with how the past is represented and what effect this will have on future generations.

Christiansë's novel articulates an important turning point in the history of global settlement. It shows how complex and changing structures of slavery and freedom came to be inscribed into a racialised narrative of ethnic essentialism with a clear divide between a settler as European and the African as slave. It marks the end of centuries of human reproductive, geographical and social movement, and a beginning of an era where these movements and the communities they produced were marked as shameful, inferior and illegitimate. Sila's refusal to confess operates as a central device which charts the submerged Indian Ocean history throughout the novel while ultimately also testifying to its loss.

NOTES

- ¹ A Readers Guide is an unpaginated appendix to the novel.
- ² The slave trade was banned in 1808. Slavery was abolished in 1834 but prolonged by a period of apprenticeship until 1838.
- ³ Gwyn Campbell (2005, 2006, 2008, 2010) and Nigel Worden (1985, 2005, 2007) discuss these aspects of Cape slavery as part of the slave trade across the Indian Ocean.
- ⁴ See Hofmeyr for a discussion of the characteristics of these paradigms. See also: Alpers 2000; Bose 2006; Kearney 2004; McPherson 1993; and Pearson 1998, 2000.
- ⁵ See Ross and Wentzel on lack of slave narratives in the Cape. Novels depicting Cape slavery, such as Rayda Jacob's *The Slave Book* (1998) and Therese Benadé's *Kites of Good Fortune* (2004) are based on historical and archival sources where the authors position themselves as descendants of slaves. Other novels depicting slavery at the Cape are Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* (1983) and André Brink's *The Rights of Desire* (2000).
- ⁶ See Shell 2001 for an analysis of Cape slavery as part of the changing structure of the family institution. See also Ahjum for a discussion of the relevance of the slave matronymic for the subject position of slave women.
- ⁷ For a discussion of Derrida's *Archive Fever* in a South African context, see Derrida (2002), van Zyl and Harris.
- ⁸ The Memorial to the Slave in Cape Town's Church Square by artists Wilma Cruise and Gavin Younge takes the form of a grid of granite blocks to express, in abstract form, the history of slavery at the Cape.
- ⁹ Ross points out that 'Cape Town, of course, was not just a city of masters and slaves. The visiting sailors and the local soldiers lived lives that were probably as oppressed as those of the slaves, and certainly the social distance between the slaves and this group of whites was very considerably less than that between a sailor and his captain' (Ross

21). See also his discussion of *knegten* as 'men who had climbed their way up from the lowest levels of North European society' (Ross 30).

- ¹⁰ Rayda Jacob's novel *The Slave Book* (1998) depicts slavery and the process of inverse assimilation of the son of a slave owner into a Muslim community at the Cape. For a discussion of the significance of Islam in this novel see Baderoon 2009, Gqola 2010, Olausson 2011 and Samuelson 2010.

- ¹¹ See Baderoon 2005, Bradlow and Cairns 1978, Ward and Worden 1998.

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CHRISTOPHER E.W. OUMA

Navigating the Lagos Cityscape in Chris Abani's *Graceland*

INTRODUCTION

In Chris Abani's¹ *Graceland*, the city is a spatio-temporal terrain connecting diverse worlds. It is a place of dialogue and conflict, a 'city of attractions' (Highmore 45) and distractions, dystopia and utopia. As an urban space, Abani's Lagos is seen through a rookery, a tenement city called Maroko and through the life story of the sixteen-year-old protagonist, Elvis Oke. The plot development alternates between Lagos the city in the present and Afikpo, Elvis's countryside home — in the past. This shift in time and space moves memory between Afikpo and Lagos, and plots the simultaneity of dystopian and utopian living in the present Lagosian cityscape. The dystopian existence portrayed in the poverty, deprivation and filth intermingles with utopia — the surreality of dreams, wishes, hopes and the connected imagination of worlds apart. Maroko's life-blood is found in the hope of flight and the power of imagination triggered by the pervasive forms of mass media available for consumption.

Graceland portrays Lagos through the practico-sensory experience and the imagination of Elvis's late childhood. Elvis navigates Lagos from the micro-perspective of Maroko. The narrative plots Elvis's experiences in the process of trying to make a living in the harsh economic and political environment of Lagos. As the plot shifts in space and time, it foregrounds connections between Elvis's economic struggles, the history of conflict between him and his father Sunday Oke as well as the struggle to understand himself as a cultural subject in the rapidly globalising city of Lagos. The narrative therefore depicts Elvis's struggles through the squalid conditions and life in the economic margins of the city, and the power of imagination that allows him to survive and transcend his economic conditions. Significantly, Elvis's experience of the city — how he navigates it and becomes acquainted with its intricate cultural, economic and political maps — presents an interesting process of map-making.

This essay examines the protagonist's navigation of the city of Lagos in light of his experience of Maroko and in the continuum of its utopian and dystopian frameworks of existence. Elvis remaps the city, through not only the ocular, but also through a construction of aural and olfactory cartographies. By foregrounding the smell-scapes and sound-scapes of the city Elvis performs what Jacques Rancière has called a '[re]distribution of the sensible' (12) — as the reader engages with the narrator's sensorial cartographies, she/he uncovers the author's

‘politics of aesthetics’. Elvis reveals order in the chaos of Lagosian daily life, while constructing for the reader a synthetic ‘literary city’ through the contrasting dimensions of economic dystopia and cultural utopia. Maroko is where Elvis’s experience is anchored and where his idea of the city finds interpretative and microcosmic importance.

THE ‘LITERARY CITY’

Maroko was an actual informal settlement that existed in Nigeria, the result of a gradual process of gentrification as the aboriginal fishing community of Lagos was edged out of Ikoyi by the increasing costs of housing (Sule 83). Later it became one of the most expensive suburbs in Lagos. Elvis describes Maroko as a ‘swamp city’ which is ‘suspended’ on rickety stilts and wooden planks (6). This precariousness is symbolic of the fragility of the material, culture, moral and the general socio-economic fibre of this society. The fragility is informed by what Peter Marcuse and Ronald van Kempen describe in *Globalizing Cities* as the ‘ghettos of exclusion’, where an endemic attitude of abandonment is rife; they call this the ‘abandoned city’ (19). It is part of the city destined to be ‘illegible’ (Highmore, 18). Highmore refers here to parts of the city that exist below and beside the radar of town planning and official cartography. An overwhelming atmosphere of abandonment is evident in the unsightly sludge, dirt, mud puddles and mangrove swamps. The people of Maroko have to literally slog their way through the debased physical environment as Elvis does every morning:

While he waited, Elvis stared into the muddy puddles, imagining what life if any, was trying to crawl its way out. His face reflected back at him, seemed to belong to a stranger, floating there like a ghostly head out of a comic book... As he sloshed to the bus stop, one thought repeated in his mind: What do I have to do with all this? (6)

Abani’s representation of Maroko may be described in Highmore’s terms as a ‘metaphor city’ (1) from which cultural readings can be made of the material and symbolic. Both Highmore and Nuttall examine the representations of the city as metaphors which not only signify symbolic capital but which are constitutive of the material cultures of actual cities. Nuttall (195) reads the city as constituted by layers of texts — billboards, newsprints, road signs and other representative textual markers.² In this manner, the text is constituted as material culture and therefore the represented city — the literary city, like Maroko and Lagos in *Graceland*, becomes part of a material and symbolic culture which Nuttall argues is the symbolic ‘literary infrastructure’ that constitutes the city’s imaginary shape (33). Maroko is synecdochic to Lagos where symbolic meanings can be drawn from cultural readings. So *Graceland* becomes part of what Chris Dunton (2008) refers to as the ‘Lagos Novel’, following the popular work of Cyprian Ekwensi in the late ’60s and ’70s as examined by Emenyomu (1974).³ In addition to its stylistic genealogy, *Graceland* has also been examined in terms of its portrayal of the postcolonial subject’s identity (Nnodim, 2008). This essay’s focus on the specific

aspect of multiple sensorial cartographies of Lagos moves away from the focus on the crisis of urban subjectivity which has defined critical examination of Lagos and the general postcolonial city (Enwezor, et.al 2002; Freund, 2007). While the essay acknowledges the crisis of material (read economic) living, it highlights the symphony in the cacophony of city life, the rhythms of Lagosian 'chaos', in a way that, as Nnodim aptly puts it, 'astounds the senses' (321). Abani's Lagos refocuses the reader's sensorial experience of it to the percussive aesthetic of a 'literary city' (Nuttall 33). This is portrayed in multiple rhythms of sounds, the multiple colours and smells that the reader experiences through the creative imagination of the protagonist. As the essay will demonstrate, Elvis's sensorial experience becomes the 'infrastructure' that imaginatively constructs a fascinating map of Lagos. A quick preview for instance is found in a scene where 'the plank walkways' of Maroko, which are described as the skeletal infrastructure of the city, ring out like 'xylophones as a variety of shoes hurrying over them struck diverse notes' (24).

Maroko is located at economic and socio-political margins within the architecture of Lagos. Materially, it is a place of despondence and abandonment, sustained by informal economies — kiosks and 'rickety lean-tos' (3) and establishments like 'Madam Caro's Bar and Restaurant' which is described as a 'rather grandiloquent name for the shaky wood-and-zinc shack perched on the edge of a walkway' (25). Culturally, it is a cornucopia of positive energy (Dunton 2008)⁴, creativity and imagination. Elvis, thrives in this diverse culture. His hobby-turned-occupation of impersonating Elvis Presley allows him to draw on the creative energy that oozes out of these impoverished material conditions. His talent for impersonation is borne out of his early maternal influences, and a childhood revealed to be thriving through imagination in *Graceland*. Elvis's economic deprivation (3) is only relieved by imaginative flight and cultural creativity. There is a thin line between what is material and metaphysical as revealed by the narrator's description of the infrastructural wastage in Elvis's neighbourhood: 'Between the pillars, a woman had erected a buka, no more than a rickety lean-to made of sheets of corrugated iron roofing and plastic held together by hope' (3). Indeed the idea that the dilapidated built environment is held together by 'hope' speaks to something more than just fanciful imagination. The hope — the metaphysical — is the engine of survival in the face of a reality of dilapidation. In the middle of desolation, the rhythm of life — in people, things and the built environment — seems to be defined by an animistic coexistence of nature and nurture, as described below:

Water, thick with sediment, ran down the rust-coloured iron roofs, overflowing basins and drums set out to collect it. Taps stood in yards, forlorn and lonely, their curved spouts, like metal beaks, dripping rainwater. Naked children exploded out of grey, wet houses, slipping and splaying in the mud, chased by shouts of parents trying to get them ready for school. (3–4)

Nature and nurture collide in a chaotic way in Maroko, and as the rain washes down in a cleansing fashion there is still an overhanging ‘smell of garbage from refuse dumps, unflushed toilets and stale bodies’ (4). Despite this fetid material world in the margins, there are many other cultural worlds in a rich and hybrid musical symphony. Abani offers a rich aural counterpoint to the dreariness of this ocular perception when Elvis listens to the city waking up. Morning in the city is defined by ‘tin buckets scraping, the sound of babies crying, infants yelling for food and people hurrying but getting nowhere’, there is Bob Marley’s ‘Natural Mystic’ playing and the ‘highlife music’, a ‘faster-tempoed’ one by Celestine Ukwu also playing next door (4). These sounds begin to paint a picture of the culturally harmonious and diverse landscape that is Maroko, and of the multiple worlds that co-exist within the cultural imagination of this society. Using Highmore’s postulations, such acoustic cacophony reveals a different idea of movement and rhythm of the city that policy makers and urban planners of cities can never make intelligible — for according to Highmore, the advent of modernity meant the illusion of order created within cities (8–16). In this sense, as Sophie Watson suggests, there exists in such marginal and illegitimate sections of the city, ‘sites of magical urban encounters, hidden in the interstices of planned and monumental, divided and segregated, or privatised and thematised, spaces that more usually capture public attention’ (5). For Watson, the enchantments found in the politics of spatial difference find a nuanced encounter in the marginal ‘micro-publics’ that are generally illegible in the mainstream discourse of the city.

Maroko is culturally cosmopolitan, consuming global cultural products in an inventive and creative way — a manner best described by Homi Bhabha (143) as ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’. For Bhabha ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ is the result of what he calls ‘cultures of survival’ (247) — ways in which adoption and adaptation of cultures work to make them functional for socio-economically marginalised groups. The Lagos cityscape is therefore a terrain of worlds simultaneously in dialogue and conflict. Elvis spends his teenage years in this transformative, creative yet economically deprived environment. His earlier childhood in Afikpo gave him a fairly homogenous and stable sense of the world: he lived in a nuclear household, regularly visited the bioscope and had mastered the popular modes of expression. Now sixteen, he confronts a frenzied cultural space that plunges him into an unstable economic life with increasing expectations of growth and responsibility. Creativity becomes the substance of existence and Elvis embraces the pastiche and hybrid outlook of existence provided by the multicultural worlds which are reflected in his room:

Elvis looked around his room. *Jesus Can Save* and *Nigerian Eagles* almanacs hung from stained walls that had not seen a coat of paint in years. A magazine cutting of a BMW was coming off the far wall, its end flapping mockingly. A piece of wood, supported at both ends by cinder blocks, served as a bookshelf. (4–5)

Elvis's reading tastes — Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* — reflect the significance of not only imagination as a way to navigate the deprived socio-economic landscape but also 'the therapeutic or corrective power of published knowledge' (Dunton 74).⁵ Dunton discusses the importance of textuality reflected in the 'Lagos Novel' of the twenty-first century as central to a positive and creative energy, which he contrasts to the 'low entropy' often associated with the African city (Enwezor, et.al 2002; Freund, 2007). Moreover, in *Graceland*, Elvis's avid reading practices are part of the author's intertextual strategy to reveal the novels that inform this narrative. For instance, Elvis's existential crisis can be related to that of the 'invisible man' in Ralph Ellison's work. This allows the astute reader to make connections between Elvis's choice of texts and his marginal material existence. However, his imaginative and creative power reinscribes his sense of agency.

NAVIGATING THE CITY: LANDSCAPES OF DESIRES, POETIC GEOGRAPHIES ENTROPIC REALITIES

The architectural brittleness of Maroko — the suspended poise, the pastiche of building materials reflected in the interior design of Elvis's own room — is also a reproduction of an imaginary world. The inhabitants of Maroko, like Elvis, imagine a life into actual existence. In Elvis's case, the reality of economic deprivation is obviated by a free-reigning imagination that allows him to try to make a living out of the impersonation of Elvis Presley. Elvis's early childhood, defined by an abusive father, sexual molestation and the loss of his mother has created a crisis of subjectivity for him, which is particularly evident in his sexual confusion in the Lagosian present. Elvis occupies, a 'landscape of desires' (Prakash 14) created by the consumption of images, sounds, memories and cultural artefacts. His later childhood culminates in a mixture of desire, despondency, blitheness, and therefore a dystopian and utopian framework of existence that reflects the urbanscape of Lagos.

This landscape of desires is culturally contiguous with and concretely manifested in the discordant architecture of the built environment. The narrator has a particularly demonstrative and sensational way of mixing images of the built environment with ocular and aural senses to construct a discordant yet artistic image of Maroko:

The plank walkways, which crisscrossed three-quarters of the slum, rang out like xylophones as a variety of shoes hurrying over them struck diverse notes. In the mud underneath this suspended city, dogs, pigs, goats and fowl rooted for food. Somewhere in the vicinity, the congregation of a Spiritual Church belted out a heady, fecund music that was a rhythmic, percussive background to their religious ecstasy. (24)

The image of a 'suspended city' invokes a metaphysical phenomenon of material isolation, desolation and alienation. But the acoustic images ('rhythmic, percussive') invoke a wealth of alternative economies that characterise and therefore 'support' this suspended city. Moreover, the alienation of Maroko

from the mainstream economy of Lagos has created informal economies such as Elvis's impersonation activities, Benji's 'hooking up services', which involve 'hooking people up with others seeking a service or a favour or a thug' (26), and Okon who sells his blood to earn money for food. Benji and Okon are part of the struggling masses in the city who try their hands at anything to eke out a living. 'De King of de Beggars', one of the more visible of Elvis's acquaintances, turns out to be a politically conscious hobo who tragically mobilises masses in the city against the military regime (299–303). Within the perceived chaos, there exists an intricate internal order, as Rem Koolhaas describes Lagos. As Elvis navigates the city he builds networks with people like 'de King of de Beggars' and Okon. Lagosian formal economy is beyond the reach of the inhabitants of ghetto cities like Maroko. They are no more than a source of cheap labour for the mainstream. Elvis's experience in a construction job that Benji 'hooked' him up with, illustrates the sheer alienation and irony that exists in the contiguous images of development and decay within the Lagos cityscape (27–29). For example, while Lagos is awash with 'new high-rise apartment complexes and office blocks' (27), the army of construction workers who provide the labour cannot even afford lunch. Indeed the masses of labourers are zombified 'bodies' described as 'Masons with cement-dusted bodies' and 'hands of used sandpaper, the backs wrinkled, the palms scoured and calloused' (28).

There is a symbolic hierarchy of habitation within the cityscape, as modernity, represented by the 'sweeping flyovers', seems to tear across the skies of the shantytowns beneath them. The narrative provides a worm's eye view of the position of marginal persons through Elvis's actual position on the ground. It is interesting that as the power of the image registers in Elvis's mind, he is buoyed into leaps of cinematic imagination — he imagines himself a film director:

What shots would he line up? Which wouldn't make the final edit? Ending up on the cutting-room floor? It frustrated him to think this way. Before he read the book on film theory he found in the second-hand store, movies were as much magic to him as the strange wizards who used to appear in the markets of his childhood. Now when he watched a movie, he made internal comparison about what angle would have been better, and whether the watermelon shattering in the street of a small western town was a metaphor for death or a commentary about the lack of water. (9)

Elvis uses the ocular sense to paint the disparate images of the city within the same street — he describes a customer 'reading a book on quantum physics', who he thinks is probably a 'professor down on his luck', and a 'thief stalking a potential victim with all the stealth of a tiger' (30). However, Elvis is equally vulnerable to the vagaries of the city's underbelly as a one-eyed beggar with a 'long scar, keloidal and thick' accosts him. The beggar's 'hair was a mess of matted brown dreadlocks, yet he was clean, and his old clothes appeared freshly washed' (30–31). This beggar turns out to be 'de King of de Beggars', one of Elvis's seminal acquaintances who has a strong sense of moral probity, is a revolutionary and an intellectual of sorts, and who expresses himself in pithy aphorisms.

There is something defamiliarising and alienating yet fulfilling about the landscape and the city that he calls 'half-slum, half-paradise', a place 'so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time' (7). There is, as Elvis reckons, a constant revelation about Maroko that 'nothing prepares you for' (48). The ragged built environment suspended above the filth of the mangrove swamp seems, according to Elvis, to be in a perpetual sense of becoming:

Half of the town was built of a confused mix of clapboard, wood, cement and zinc sheets, raised above a swamp by means of stilts and wooded walkways. The other half, built on solid ground reclaimed from the sea, seemed to be clawing its way out of the primordial swamp, attempting to become something else. (48)

The primordial swamp is a constant background of the haphazard construction that is symbolic of the slog and plod that characterises the existential condition. Furthermore, in the scatological portrayal of Maroko there is much that concerns Elvis: 'a little boy, sank into the black filth under one of the houses' and 'a man squatted on a plank walkway outside his house, defecating in the swamp below, where a dog lapped up the faeces before they hit the ground'. Much to Elvis's disgust, he 'saw another young boy sitting on an outcrop of planking, dangling a rod in the water' (48). The narrator employs these images of filth and food to characterise the cyclical conditions of a 'miasmal city' that is adjacent to the 'garden cities':

Looking up, Elvis saw a white bungalow. Its walls were pristine, as though a supernatural power kept the mud off it. The small patch of earth in front of it held a profusion of red hibiscus, pink crocuses, mauve bachelor's buttons and sunflowers. The sight cheered him greatly. (48)

Lagos becomes a collage of images of poverty and affluence, a 'dual city' of conflicting material realities which maybe observed in the aural images of this city, as well as the cultural energy that it generates. This cultural energy is found not only in the imaginative landscapes that are, as in the case of Elvis leaping out of the material boundaries, but also in the cultural production and circulation of artefacts around the cityscape. Music, food, clothing, books, magazines and paintings are the concrete products of Lagos' cultural landscape that tell a different narrative of movement and circulation, different from the static, sluggish, almost immobile nature of the built environment of Maroko. It is these cultural products — mediated through communication networks like radio, television and video — that speed up the idea of Lagosian rhythm and movement. The pervasive nature of these particular forms of mass media allows the cultural energy of Maroko to be realised. One of the sites for the mobility of cultures and artifacts is the market, and Elvis's navigation of the built environment takes him to the market within the Lagosian cityscape.

As in the fiction of Chinua Achebe and other early Nigerian writers, the market place is a significant network of the movement of people, goods, ideas and general cultural artefacts. The representation of the market place here reveals the apex

of cultural tastes, mobility and creativity where the cultural landscape overlaps the Lagos cityscape. The market constructs networks for the informal economies that make such miasmal cities as Maroko thrive. Their situation within the dual economy of the city of Lagos erases the compartmentalised movement of ideas, people and goods that urban planners envisioned for the city. While its location within the physical precincts of the city implies an act of planning, the circulation of the cultural products, artefacts and ideas continuously inscribe and re-inscribe cultural boundaries. The products in circulation include both indigenous and imported items, which signify the market place as a site of competing cultures and knowledges. Abani demonstrates the mobility and circulation of knowledge in the most unlikely of places. Describing the second-hand books as being sold via a cart, he refers to the 'dog-eared Penguin Classics', giving the example of *A Tale of Two Cities* by quoting the first line, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' (1). This reference also captures Elvis's perception and experience of the city which he described earlier as 'half-slum, half-paradise' (7).

Through this market scene, the reader is made aware of Elvis's reading tastes as well as how the idea of the text and the narrative as cultural product in a circulation network reflects the co-existence of 'high' and 'low' canon and popular culture within the space of the market. As Elvis walks around the book carts he discovers works by Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti, Elechi Amadi, Camara Laye, Mariama Ba, 'thrillers' by Kalu Okpi, Valentine Alily as well as works by Dostoevsky and James Baldwin. Through the text's presence within this market, it gains a central role as not just a representation or a reflection, but actually a product being represented and referenced by Abani, alongside food, music and clothing — an actual cultural product, a good like any other within this multicultural and transcultural network of the city. Abani also takes this chance to reference, as part of a material culture, the Onitsha market literature, giving a vignette of its historical importance in the epistemological history of Eastern Nigeria:

These pamphlets, written between 1910 and 1970, were produced on small presses in the eastern market town of Onitsha, hence the name. They were the Nigerian equivalent of dime drugstore pulp fiction crossed with pulp pop self-help books. They were morality tales with their subject matter and tone translated straight out of the oral culture. (112)

The sub-cultural relevance of these works is underscored through the politics and morality of daily living within the cityscape. However, the notion of 'landscapes of desires' is portrayed in the escapist ideals of beauty, money and American imagery:

The covers mirrored American pulp fiction with luscious, full-breasted Sophia Loren look-alike white women. Elvis had read a lot of them, though he wouldn't admit it publicly. These books were considered to be low-class trash, but they sold in the thousands. (112)

Abani then quotes a whole section from one of the pamphlets 'Beware of Harlots and Many Friends'. The reference to Onitsha market literature allows

the city to be explored through a textual landscape. The texts here — books and pamphlets — are being represented as consumer products in circulation within the cityscape, as part and parcel of goods within the networks of the city. The material culture nature of the goods in circulation, and their representation, underscores their relevance as not only academic or sentimental products, but also as products that speak to the condition of the subject in the postcolonial city. Their sub-cultural relevance and their mass consumption reflect a creative imagining of literacy within the miasmal, informal city networks. It also gives Abani the chance to reinscribe the culturally creative nature of literary activity within the informal city network as well as reference a history of popular cultural products in postcolonial Nigeria.⁶ In this activity, Abani uses the novel to demonstrate the potential of the text as an archive of the metropolis. As Mbembe and Nutall suggest, the text or the act of writing can be understood to portray the 'metropolis as an archive' (52). The 'Lagos novel' includes both popular and canonical novels in light of the protean nature of cultural politics within the marginal cityscape. The Lagos novel therefore lends itself to the malleable nature of cultural rhythms in the city.

The daily issues dealt with in this popular literature reveal a gendered perception and representation of the city. With titles like 'Mable the sweet honey that poured away' and 'Beware of Harlots and Many Friends', laws governing morality are spelled out, making conspicuous the female body — the 'harlot' — as subject and object of derision. This literature attempts moral and cultural gate-keeping, and assumes social entropy is the norm within the city. At the same time, the cityscape is reflected through a hierarchy of gendered labour division, in which even within an informal economy where theft, drug-dealing, extortion and trade in human parts is rife, the sex worker is exaggeratedly criminalised. There is in this idea of the popular, a patriarchal, ultra-masculine framework of interpretation. Informal economies are the result of the state's failure to provide food, shelter and clothing. These economies thrive by sheer cultural creativity, but are also overseen through a patriarchal perception of morality, decency and rules of behaviour.

Therefore, the market is a bastion of cultural knowledge, societal rules and policies on appropriate behaviour. The market in this sense becomes a 'micro-public' as Watson says of those marginal public spheres that are never the sites of theoretical and practical consideration in matters of policy, design or planning (18). It is also a place of 'enchantment' and of 'phantasmagoria', reflecting the psychic state of the city. Occupied by free-flowing imagination and subjects who bear the brand of what Mbembe and Roitman call 'the subject in times of crisis' (99),⁷ the market is a conspicuous meeting place in the landscape of the city, allowing its inhabitants an illusion of choice and agency and the ephemeral catharsis found in spending power that the market offers to clients.

Yet the market, populated mostly by petty traders is subjected to surveillance as portrayed in the ironic urban planning efforts to clear the city of informal

traders, hawkers and food sellers. It restricts even further, the movement of those in the margins of the city. During his regular escapades in the city, Elvis sees the police battle with street hawkers in an effort to clear them from the streets of Lagos. In one instance, a hawker whose wares are thrown into a fire by a policeman commits suicide by throwing himself into the same fire used to burn his wares (74). A collective sense of dystopia, anger and despondency emerges in the informal settlements, as police 'man' the cityscape. This angst is located in the period of disillusionment in the postcolonial African city, where 'crisis' has become central to the politics of daily life. As Mbembe & Roitman argue, the collective anger is borne of a 'crisis in space and matter' leading to such acts as suicide and mob justice. Considering decay in the built environment, a condition that results from 'historical violence', subjects are plunged into a 'prolonged state of anxiety and perplexity' (Mbembe & Roitman 125). Elvis witnesses inexplicable incidences of mob-justice as micro-public spheres turn into avenues for venting the helplessness of the masses against the juggernaut of repressive state apparatuses in their attempts to police the crisis.

These forms of mass violence are turned eventually into mass resistance and political mobilisation, when the state decides to raze Maroko. The forces of gentrification attempt to redefine the spatial politics of the city⁸, while a Fanonesque revolutionary lumpenproletariate resists it. The police hold sway and spatial politics within the city of Lagos are redefined at the cost of hundreds of lives, including Elvis's father Sunday Oke. Meanwhile, Elvis's escapades end in his arrest, torture and release, and he finds he has nowhere to call a home anymore, as he confronts the debris of buildings and people, including the mangled remains of his father. The imagery here is visually disturbing in its representation of death, debris and scavengers. It is the end of an era, borne out of revolutionary efforts from the *lumpen* against the police. As an anatomy of destruction, Maroko has come full circle, in its creation and destruction and even in its decaying moment, the imagery of a putrefying eco-system is visually powerful, collapsing the images of life and death and putting human and animal within egalitarian food chains:

All around, scavengers, human and otherwise, feasted on the exposed innards of Maroko. They rummaged in the rubble as bulldozers sifted through the chaos like slow-feeding buffalo. Here some article of clothing still untorn; there a pot; over there a child's toy with the squeaker still working. There was a lot of snorting coming from a clump of shrubs as a pack of hungry dogs fed. The hand of a corpse rose up from between the snarling dogs in a final wave. (303–304)

This is the height of dystopia for Elvis and as he walks around in delirium, having been literally alienated from what he previously identified as a home, the city looks destitute to him. The spatial practices of Lagos have been re-configured in what the government ironically calls 'Operation Clean the Nation'. The imagery of destitution is presented through the mass of beggar children:

His eyes caught those of a young girl no more than twelve. She cut her eyes at him and heaving her pregnant body up, walked away. He glanced at another child and saw a look of old boredom in his eyes. Elvis read the city, seeing signs not normally visible. (306)

The re-configuration of the city has suddenly rendered things visible for Elvis and the usual signposts have been defamiliarised. In the city, the people are anxious and delusional:

a man stood, then sat, then stood again. Now he danced. Stopped. Shook his head and laughed and then hopped around in an odd birdlike gait. He was deep in conversation with some hallucination. It did not seem strange to Elvis that the spirit world became more visible and tangible the nearer one was to starvation. The man laughed and his diaphragm shook, Elvis thought he heard the man's ribs knocking together, producing a sweet, haunting melody like the wooden xylophones of his small-town childhood. (307)

There is a thin line between dystopia and utopia, the spiritual and material. Other worlds suddenly seem in dialogue with the living. In this state of delirium:

Elvis traced patterns in the cracked and parched earth beneath his feet. There is a message in it all somewhere, he mused, a point to the chaos. But no matter how hard he tried, the meaning always seemed to be out there somewhere beyond reach, mocking him. (307)

Later, Elvis finds himself in 'Bridge City', another ghetto under the massive Lagos bridges. Space and time fuse into each other as Elvis falls in and out of consciousness. In this community of beggar children, 'Time lost all meaning in the face of that deprivation' (309), and surviving the evening seems like the goal of a lifetime. The city here is a jungle with a vicious law of survival of the fittest. In this part of the city, despondency is synonymous with images of children begging, selling and basically sustaining the day-to-day running of their destitute homes. The city has reached a nadir, basically grinding to a halt when the floods come sweeping through. These conditions eventually coincide with Elvis's reunion with Redemption. In a fortuitous and serendipitous turn of events, Redemption gives Elvis his passport with an American visa. This becomes Elvis's final act of impersonation, one that eventually sees him travel to 'Graceland' — America.

CONCLUSION

In Abani's *Graceland*, Lagos is seen through the eyes of a sixteen-year-old who leads an impoverished material existence but who constructs a rich cultural environment through his desire for flight and survival. While Abani constructs the structural dialogue of time and space (Afikpo and Lagos as Country and City), the narrative focuses on the city to plot contemporary conditions of the character's postcolonial childhood. The squalor, filth, hunger, begging, sexual molestation and assault is borne by the children in the numerous instances that Elvis witnesses or is involved with. These childhoods are constructed within the dystopian and utopian planes of existence that speak to the socio-cultural and economic duality

of Lagos. These planes of existence are in a conflicting dialogue with each other, reproducing liminal identities characterised by what Mudimbe has referred to as a 'precarious pertinence' (5).

The interaction and dialogue between realism and surrealism in the life of the city is dizzying, blurring the material conditions of existence and the imaginative ones. The city becomes therefore in Abani's case, the toponym for contemporary identities. It is within this dystopia/utopia, slum/paradise binary that contemporary childhoods are increasingly being constructed. Hence, as Lefebvre's (1996) prescient *Writings on Cities* posits, urbanisation has indeed blurred the binaries between city and country and the production of space has extended beyond the built environment to the cyber-environment and therefore to thought processes which construct 'representative spaces', reflected in imagination and the landscapes of desires that we see in *Graceland*.

Abani's idea of space and place works through a scatological imagery and non-attachment expressive of a fast and furious rhythm, through what in borrowing the words of Mbembe and Nuttall can be described as 'technologies of speed' (369). The movement between cultural worlds is sped up by the power of imagination, the desire for survival and flight. The city, for Abani, is a place in which identities are in constant and dizzying mutation: mobility is critical to these (post)modern identities — circulation, translocation and transculturation are analytical terms for these forms of identity represented by the protagonist Elvis Oke. The idea of place and space is defined by circulation and mobility because of a transcultural and multicultural milieu.

Childhood in Abani's *Graceland* is a dialogue of multiple worlds in rapid and dizzying interaction within the time, place and space of the city. A childhood in the cityscape is constructed through navigation, mobility and circulation of bodies, goods, music, magazines and books. The cityscape allows for the blurring of imaginative and concrete conditions. The city is a place in which modernity, through technology and forms of mass mediation, affects identity formation. It is a highly unsettled space that constructs postcolonial subjects who, in the wake of the increasing mobility of cultures, are spoilt for imaginative choices. A pastiche of cultures, the postcolonial African city is the site of contemporary postmodern identities within an increasing global order. The postcolonial condition of the cityscape — survival, flight, utopia, dystopia, desire and imagination is an influential foundation for postmodern constructions of the self.

NOTES

¹ Chris Abani is a Nigerian writer who lives in Los Angeles in the United States. Abani lived in exile in London before moving to the United States. He has also published two novels (*Masters of the Board* [1985], *Virgin of Flames* [2007]), two novellas (*Becoming Abigail* [2006], *Song for Night* [2007]), as well as five collections of poetry.

² See Sarah Nuttall, 'Literary City'.

- ³ Emenyomu examines Cyprian Ekwensi as one of the first novelists to engage with Lagos as a represented city. Ekwensi's popular works like *Jagua Nana* and *People of the City* are considered some of the earliest literary engagements with Lagos. For other work on Lagos the city see Obiechina (1973) and Echeruo (1977).
- ⁴ Chris Dunton's article 'Energy and Entropy: City of words', traces the historiography of the 'Lagos novel' from the 1960s and talks about the idea of positive energy in contemporary novels set in Lagos.
- ⁵ Dunton's idea of the text and published knowledge as a diacritical feature of the contemporary Lagos novel is illustrated in Abani's referencing of a variety of texts, which include the pharmacopeia and recipes that find their relevance within the structural organisation of the central narrative (as material culture of memory sourced from Elvis Oke's late mother) as well as the strategic referencing of Onitsha market literature as the authentic textual product of the popular urban Lagos space.
- ⁶ Okome (2002) 'Writing the Anxious City: Images of Lagos in Nigerian Home Video Films' examines the history of the city through the cultural products in circulation. Okome points out 'Thus, it was the Onitsha market literature that began the critique of citiness as opposed to rurality, which became amplified in the city novels of Cyprian Ekwensi' (321). Hence it is through the text that discourse on Lagos began and Abani's description of Onitsha market pamphlets goes back to, arguably the origins of the 'Lagos novel'.
- ⁷ Mbembe and Roitman refer here to figures that are constituted by the crisis of socio-cultural, economic and political fragmentation — a crisis of what they refer to as 'space and matter'.
- ⁸ The forcible displacement of residents of Maroko led to the destitution of over 300,000 people with the parcel of land that was Maroko given to high ranking military officers as well as private developers (Ahonsi 137).

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T. MICHAEL MBOYA

THE LETTER

It was fortunate that Mrs. Agwambo had, in what she would have thought uncharacteristic of herself, walked straight onto the carpet in her high and pointed heeled shoes, for the door she had just gently pushed shut narrowly missed her as it violently swung open. Mrs. Agwambo turned to see who it was, her forehead wrinkling in disapproval. Auntie, who had flung the front door open, did not come in. Breathing heavily, she leaned forward, most of her weight falling on her right hand which firmly gripped the handle of the door it had shot after and reined back.

‘There’s a letter for Bebi’s father,’ Auntie said, then paused to catch her breath, before continuing, ‘on the sideboard.’

Mrs. Agwambo’s impulse was to ask who the letter was from, but she decided to hold the question in for a moment, and instead, first to tell her maid a thing or two about the proper opening and closing of doors. She looked down at her shoes and swallowed. Then she looked up in time to see the door banging shut. Presently Mrs. Agwambo heard Auntie’s footsteps on the pavement as the house help lumbered towards the gate. The girl was going to fetch Mrs. Agwambo’s daughter from school. And — as usual — she was late. Mrs. Agwambo shook her head slowly as she turned about and walked to the nearest seat, an armchair. Clutching against her stomach the handbag that had been hanging on long straps from her left shoulder, lazily trailing along, Mrs. Agwambo flopped into the seat. When she was comfortable she unhurriedly, carefully wrenched her shoes off, first using the sharp nose of her right shoe on the dent between the heel and the upper body of the left shoe, then the toes of her left foot on the seam of the hind part of the right shoe. With her heels she pushed the shoe under her chair. Enjoying the vaguely ticklish feel of the fluffy carpet against the soles of her feet, she slowly stretched her legs before her. Then she blew her cheeks.

Mrs. Agwambo was tired. She always was at the end of a working day. Even though well paying, her job as a teller in a bank was very monotonous and lonely. But there was the status, the money, and of course the concealed challenge: the fact that it was a position of responsibility and trust that required the kind of maturity Mrs. Agwambo knew she possessed. The warmth in the house soon made Mrs. Agwambo drowsy. But she did not want to doze off. She reasoned that she had to get up: to get up and organise things. To get up and see about supper: about evening tea: to get up and have a bath: to get up... She wriggled her left shoulder a little, and the handbag strap fell on an arm of the chair. She extricated her left hand from the trap-like loop that the strap had formed. With her right hand she lifted the bag by its handle from her lap, where it had slid to, and carried it towards the

side stool on her right, but when it was in mid-air she brought it back onto her lap, opened it and rummaged through the contents. She found the roll of lip balm she was looking for. She placed the roll on her lap, just above the bag which she now carefully lifted onto the side stool. She then picked up the roll from her lap and, after sitting further back in the armchair, deliberately rolled it across her lower lip. Then Mrs. Agwambo sat up, stretched her right arm and dropped the roll back into the handbag on the side stool. Again she relaxed in her chair, and because she was no longer looking she fumbled before she managed to pin the handbag shut. That done Mrs. Agwambo rested the back of her head against the top of the armchair's back rest and let her right arm fall limply across the armchair's right arm. Her left arm collapsed, with her elbow on the armchair's left arm and her hand on her lap. Mrs. Agwambo sat thus, almost sprawled, thinking nothing in particular, her eyes wandering desultorily all over the room as she spread the lip balm over her upper lip by folding her lips into each other, unfolding them, and lightly rubbing them against each other. This went on for a while until, looking out the window she sat facing, Mrs. Agwambo saw, against the sky that had been azure only a moment ago and which now looked as though someone had sprinkled dust on it, a light-ish, foam-like cloud, its belly bloodied by the desperate shafts of the dying sun. Mrs. Agwambo gazed long at the cloud. It struck her as looking like, like a used cotton towel. The association made the cloud both repulsive and, quite against her conscious will, fascinating to Mrs. Agwambo. She tried not to look at it but she found herself staring. By and by an increasingly insistent noise from a second direction diverted Mrs. Agwambo's attention from the cloud. She turned her head and looked out a window to her right. The noise came from a tree near the fence. It was a boisterous chattering of weaverbirds. One could imagine they were having a party, Mrs. Agwambo thought; it was, after all, a Friday. Before her wedding, and even for a while after, Mrs. Agwambo remembered, Friday nights... The vain things one enjoys when young.

Auntie and Bebi noisily clattered into the house, crashing through Mrs. Agwambo's reverie. Mrs. Agwambo turned her head slightly and saw the pair. They looked like they had been arguing, or racing. Bebi's rucksack dropped onto the floor at the same time as the door banged shut.

'You should not bang doors,' Mrs. Agwambo managed to squeeze in before the giggling Auntie, rolling on in the direction of the kitchen, disappeared through the doorway linking the sitting room with the dining room.

'Mom! Mom!' Bebi called urgently at the same time, and she strode towards Mrs. Agwambo 'Bebi, shoes!' Mrs. Agwambo cried. Bebi impatiently kicked off her shoes at the edge of the carpet and walked on in her socks, determination inscribed on her round honest face.

'Mom, can one person have two best friends?' Bebi was now standing beside Mrs. Agwambo's seat, on the left, her hands on her mother's left arm. Mrs. Agwambo looked into her daughter's earnest face. There was dust on the girl's

cheeks, on her forehead, even on her plaited hair that now desperately needed undoing. And on her T-shirt and shorts, naturally. It must have been quite a P.E., Mrs. Agwambo thought.

‘Mom, can —’

‘Of course, yes,’ Mrs. Agwambo confidently answered Bebi, and took the girl’s hand in hers. They were very dirty. Mrs. Agwambo slowly released Bebi’s hands, and sat up. ‘One person can have two, even three best friends,’ Mrs. Agwambo said off-handedly, then added, trying hard to sound more interested, ‘but why do you ask?’

‘Two best friends!’ The whispered wonder escaped through the wide eyed Bebi’s lips. Recovering quickly she said, ‘It is that Winnie. She doesn’t know whether to be my best friend or Kadogo’s best friend’.

‘You can all be best friends,’ Mrs. Agwambo said in a school mistressy voice. Bebi did not look convinced. She shrugged.

‘Your hands are very dirty,’ Mrs. Agwambo commented, and looked at her own hands. She looked at Bebi and the girl’s face broke into an embarrassed smile, her eyes twinkling. Bebi looked at her hands, hid them at her back, then turned and ran off, back to her rucksack, which she hurriedly hoisted onto her back.

‘Shoes, shoes,’ Mrs. Agwambo called. She had followed the sound of Bebi’s movement and she knew that the little girl was on her way out. Her voice arrested Bebi at the doorway to the main corridor that led to the bedrooms. Bebi shambled back. At the edge of the carpet she squatted and picked up the shoes, one in each hand, then she turned and started walking away, slowly, her head hanging. As she was shuffling past the sideboard the envelope caught her eye. She stopped, and craned her neck.

‘There’s a letter for Dad on the sideboard,’ Bebi said.

‘Ah, yes,’ Mrs. Agwambo sighed, then on an impulse added, ‘let me see it’.

Bebi let drop her shoes. She lifted the envelope from the sideboard with exaggerated care, holding its edge by her fingertips. She tip-toed towards Mrs. Agwambo, approaching her from behind. At the edge of the carpet Bebi playfully threw the envelope over the armchair’s backrest, over Mrs. Agwambo’s shoulder and giggled. She jogged out of the room, picking up her shoes en route. Mrs. Agwambo looked at the envelope. Expensive. Good hardish paper. Nice cream colour. Not flippant, not boring khaki. She turned it over. Her husband’s name. Mr. Ondiek Agwambo. No address. Nothing else. Mrs. Agwambo turned the envelope over twice and stared at her husband’s name. The writing was not familiar. It was rounded, careful: feminine.

‘Auntie!’ Mrs. Agwambo shouted. She looked at the handwriting on the envelope even more closely ‘Auntie!’

‘I’m here,’ Auntie responded from the doorway linking the sitting room with the dining room.

‘Do we have supper?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is the tea ready?’

‘Almost.’

‘Do put my bathing water on the fire, then,’ Mrs. Agwambo said. As Auntie turned to go Mrs. Agwambo asked the question that had made her call the house help, although she made the question sound like an afterthought: ‘And, Auntie, who did you say brought this letter for Bebi’s father?’

‘The man in the servant’s Quarter.’

‘Okay,’ Mrs Agwambo made to unseal the envelope, and Auntie turned to go away, then, ‘Auntie?’

‘Yes?’

‘Here, put the letter back on the sideboard.’ Mrs. Agwambo had just thought up something, something daring. And mature. And civilised.

* * * * *

An hour and a half later Mrs. Agwambo, dressed in a comfortable jogging suit, lay in the big three-sitter sofa, a cushion reinforcing the seat’s arm that supported her head. Her legs were stretched over the second arm. She was reading a pamphlet on the philosophy of the Hindu religion. Now and then she raised her face from the book, stared ahead at the now drawn-shut curtains, or turned her head and looked at the TV. On the carpet, before Mrs. Agwambo’s seat, lying on her stomach, her position perpendicular to the sofa, was Bebi. Bebi, clean and prettily dressed, was watching TV. Congolese music. From the kitchen filtered sounds of Auntie at work: tap forcefully running, then abruptly stopping; little utensils tingling, an occasional bang... The house help was washing up after the tea, and also preparing for the supper she would start cooking soon.

Over the long and winding sentences and the Congolese music and the noise from the kitchen Mrs. Agwambo heard the car pull into the garage. She raised her face from the book, turned her head, looked at the clock. It was a little after six-thirty. She looked at the TV: fat barely-clad Congolese women were violently gyrating their hips to tedious music...

‘Hey, hey,’ Ondiek Agwambo jovially greeted at the doorway to the main corridor. He had come in through the side door that opened in from the garage.

Mrs. Agwambo turned her head and looked at him. He smiled broadly, playfully at her, and she smiled back indulgently, as to a naughty child. Then she went back to her pamphlet.

‘Hey, hey, hello, hello,’ Ondiek Agwambo sung, swinging his bunch of keys. He took a step into the sitting room and craned his neck to look at his daughter.

‘Bebi, what are you so engrossed in, hey?’

‘Hi, Dad,’ Bebi flashed her father a quick smile and went back to watching TV. From the corner of her eye Mrs. Agwambo saw Ondiek Agwambo, still smiling,

shake his head. Presently she heard his footsteps and whistling on the corridor, then a door opening and closing.

‘Bebi, your father’s tea,’ Mrs. Agwambo said after a while.

‘Just a minute, Mom,’ Bebi did not take her eyes off the TV. After a minute she sighed and rose. The music programme was over. She stretched, looked at her mother, whose head was buried in a book, and took a step towards her. Bebi craned her neck and took a peep at her mother’s book. She read a sentence, then another, and not understanding them, padded on to the kitchen.

Mrs. Agwambo struggled on. The pamphlet was difficult. And Bebi kept interrupting, walking in and out, ferrying the tea things one by one. When, after several trips, the girl gently let herself down onto the carpet, in her former position, the act totally severed Mrs. Agwambo’s concentration. She put the pamphlet down on the carpet and turned her attention to the TV. News. Chaos in the capital city. Poorly dressed unkempt young men fighting the police. Tyres burning in the middle of streets. The voice over said something about drugged youth being misled into demanding a new constitution. The infantile disregard for the law, and for life itself, amazed Mrs. Agwambo. The item was soon over, and the usual news about foreign aid continued...

Ondiek Agwambo disrupted Mrs. Agwambo’s view when, a quarter of an hour after he had come into the house, he walked back into the sitting room, and over to the armchair she had sat on earlier.

‘Hear there was action in the city this morning,’ Ondiek Agwambo said after a while. From his tone it was obvious that he supported the rioters. Mrs. Agwambo grunted. She glanced at her husband. He was in casuals and he smelled fresh. His shoe laces were untied. It was obvious that he was going out.

He had never stopped going out, never grown out of the habit, never — as Mrs. Agwambo had taken to thinking lately, irritably — quite grown up.

‘Going out?’ Mrs. Agwambo asked after Ondiek Agwambo sat up in his seat. There was displeasure in her voice.

‘Just a drink or two. Will be back early.’

‘Early today, early tomorrow?’

Ondiek Agwambo smiled. He poured tea into his cup. Mrs. Agwambo saw her moment.

‘...And before I forget,’ she said, ‘there’s a letter for you on the sideboard.’ The statement sounded like a by-the-way.

‘Who is it from?’ Ondiek sugared his tea. Bebi twisted a little on the carpet and, looking at her father, said, ‘From — ’

‘Yes?’

‘From your best friend.’

Something tightened in Mrs. Agwambo’s chest. Ondiek Agwambo frowned. ‘Let me see it,’ he said wearily. Bebi jumped to her feet and got the envelope from the sideboard. She handed it over to her father and stood next to him. Ondiek

Agwambo looked at the name on the envelope, very briefly, threw what would have been a surreptitious glance at Mrs. Agwambo who ostensibly was studiously watching the TV weather report, and placed the envelope on the coffee table, next to the vacuum flask. He stirred his tea with more force than was necessary.

‘Dad, should I open the envelope for you?’ Bebi asked, pointing at the envelope.

‘No Bebi, that won’t be right,’ Mrs Agwambo firmly cut in. The intervention surprised father and daughter, and they both looked at her.

‘It is not good manners,’ Mrs Agwambo explained simply.

‘Come here, Bebi,’ She called to Bebi and stretched her hand in the child’s direction. Ondiek Agwambo sat back in the armchair and watched Bebi walk to her mother. Mrs. Agwambo’s stretched arm went round the child’s waist and drew her nearer her mother.

‘You see,’ Mrs Agwambo said to Bebi, but loudly for Ondiek Agwambo to hear, ‘letters are personal and private. Only the people they are written to should open them. That particular letter is your father’s, and only he should open it. Then he will read it, and if it has anything we should know he will tell us. Okay?’

Bebi nodded. She slowly slipped out of her mother’s hold. She started for the bedrooms but turned in to the dining room and walked on towards the kitchen, whence sounds of frying were coming. Mrs. Agwambo kept up the pretence that she was absorbed in the TV. Now and then she stole a glance at her husband. She thought he looked uneasy, and that — well? — thrilled her. She wondered how he was going to get off this time, if he was going to get off, and she waited. As she waited she thought. Why does he do it? She asked herself, as she often did. He cared for her, that much she did not doubt. He was a better husband than many of her friends’. And he loved Bebi. Supposing she walked out, then what? She couldn’t, she couldn’t. What with, with the society and everything. But she had done the mature thing. He was going to be forced to confess, and to explain. And maybe after that he would change...

Bebi jogged back into the sitting room and dived onto the carpet. She noisily resumed her former position and was soon comfortable and watching a local comedy. Ondiek Agwambo drained his cup. Then, as Mrs. Agwambo noted, he most uncharacteristically poured himself another. Mrs. Agwambo waited. At the end of his second cup Ondiek Agwambo relaxed, sat deeper into his seat. He lazily played with his keys, hitting them rhythmically against his thighs. The waiting was oppressing Mrs. Agwambo.

‘Bebi,’ Mrs. Agwambo commanded, ‘take away those tea things.’

Bebi got up.

‘Use one of the trays in the sideboard.’

Bebi silently went about the chore, and was soon out of the room. She came back with a rug to wipe the table. ‘Mind the letter,’ Mrs. Agwambo warned unnecessarily.

She looked at Ondiek Agwambo and asked him, 'Aren't you going out?'

'Ai!' Ondiek Agwambo exclaimed, trying to sound cheerful, 'Am I being chased out of the house?' He looked at Bebi as though he was appealing for her support. The child finished wiping the coffee table and walked back to the kitchen.

'If you leave here late I don't see how you're to be expected to be back early — unless of course you meant that we should expect you early tomorrow.'

'Okay then,' Ondiek Agwambo said. He got up and, yawning, stretched. He stepped away from the armchair. He knelt on his right knee and tied the lace of his left shoe, then on his left knee and tied the lace of his right shoe. Straightening up he dragged himself out of the carpet. Mrs. Agwambo violently cleared her throat.

'Caught a cold?' Ondiek Agwambo asked flippantly and turned to look at Mrs. Agwambo.

'Who is the letter from?' There was a hard edge to the question. Ondiek Agwambo opened his mouth, but he did not say anything. He looked at Mrs. Agwambo who looked back at him steadily, accusingly. He reluctantly walked back to the coffee table and picked up the envelope. Again he looked at Mrs. Agwambo as though he were seeing her for the first time. She looked back steadily. He beat the envelope against his right palm twice, looked at Mrs. Agwambo defiantly — and ripped the envelope open.

'Jimmy's rent for the month. Jimmy, you know, the new tenant in the SQ', Ondiek Agwambo said as he placed the envelope on the sideboard. At the door he added lightly, triumphantly,

'You keep the money, I may drink it all if I carry it.'

* * * * *

After the car had driven out of the compound Mrs. Agwambo, still uneasily suspicious that Ondiek Agwambo had pulled a fast one on her, rose and walked to the sideboard. She accidentally stepped on her pamphlet as she went. She shook the envelope's contents out. Besides the rent money — which was all there, Mrs. Agwambo counted it — there was a neatly folded foolscap page. She straightened it out. It was a note:

Jambo Bwana,
I'm going away for the weekend. Here's the
month's rent. See you when I get back.
Regards to the family. And thanks.

Jimmy

The note was still in Mrs. Agwambo's hand when Bebi marched humming back into the sitting room. The little girl loudly halted next to her mother, executed a stiff right turn and gave a heil Hitler salute. Then she saw the note in her mother's hand and the open envelope on the sideboard. Her eyes widened, she started opening her mouth, but she shrugged, turned and ran on to watch TV. And now Mrs. Agwambo felt — defeated.

CLAUDIA MARIA FERNANDES CORRÊA AND IRINEIA LINA CESARIO¹

An Afro-Brazilian Griot: An Interview with Conceição Evaristo

Conceição Evaristo as she is known in the literary world is an Afro-Brazilian author who has published widely both in Brazil and abroad. Her works range from poetry to essays. Born in 1946 in a favela in Belo Horizonte, the author is nowadays one of the most prominent names in the Afro-Brazilian literary world. Depicting the 'escrivência' as she names it, that is, writing the experience of the marginalised and oppressed, Conceição Evaristo has captivated readers with her deceptively simple character and stories.



* * * * *

CLAUDIA CORRÊA & IRINEIA CESARIO: *You are a prestigious author both in Brazil and abroad. You have recently been to Senegal where your works have been well received. Do you believe this signals a wider opening for the Afro-Brazilian female authors?*

CONCEIÇÃO EVARISTO: First of all, it is necessary to place this prestige in-between many quotation marks. Undoubtedly, I have been gaining visibility. However it is minimal in relation to other Brazilian authors. Researchers of very specific areas know my writing. The visibility I have today is restricted to a particular circle of researchers who bravely, shed light upon authors who are outside the canon. Researchers from several fields such as African Literatures in Portuguese Language, of literary texts written by Afro-Brazilians and African-Americans alike, as well as authors from the Caribbean, and all those who are devoted to analysing literature, gender, ethnicity, and people committed to the Black Movement. This is the very beginning where my writings start to reach a broader spectrum and launch a wider criticism. Nevertheless,

the path to be traced is still long. But I do acknowledge that there has surely been an opening for female Afro-Brazilian writers.

CC & IC: *What is your opinion on the increasing interest in your writings, as attested by the rising number of theses and dissertations about your books?*

CE: I strongly believe that the research in the literary field is a quest for new voices, texts that are differentiated from the Brazilian corpus. The search is for an authorship that affirms its racial, gender and social class belonging, but [one] that aims at surpassing such conditions, focusing on the characters' humane dramas. As I see it, many of the texts I create perform such a task. For instance, *Ponciá Vicêncio*² suffers from a pain that hurts for anyone; it is every human being's pain: loneliness. Ana Davenga and Davenga, characters from a namesake short story, have a neediness that cannot be explained alone by the fact that they are underprivileged people from the favelas. Others such as Maria and her former partner, an outcast; Maria-Nova, Bondade, Ditinha, Uncle Totó, a whole range of characters that are present in the short stories and the novels I have written. But they are beyond poverty. They embody the unexplainable, the perplexity of life. I do believe that the tone of the stories, and the effort, the work I draw myself to, have seduced the readers.

CC & IC: *Could we say that your newest book, Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos opens up a dialog with the official history by rewriting it?*

CE: Perhaps some of the poems, such as 'Vozes-mulheres', 'Meu Rosário', 'Filhos na rua', 'Meu corpo igual', 'Malungos', 'brother', 'irmãos', 'Todas as manhãs', 'Os bravos e os serenos herdarão a terra'³, in this matter are the most vehement.

CC & IC: *How do you perceive the increasing interest in the African Studies and the Afro-Brazilian history in Brazil? Do you regard it as a sort of redemption for the centuries of slavery?*

CE: Not really Redemption. There are situations that can never be redeemed. We must understand that redemption won't favour the ones who hold power. On the contrary, it will disturb an existing order. I will quote a line from one of my works, *Becos da Memória*, if I am not mistaken it goes something like this: 'the one who moves the rock is the one suffocating beneath it'. What I mean is that our efforts to affirm the existence of an Afro-Brazilian literature, as well as the efforts of Afro-Brazilian writers to write, publish, and circulate their texts have been intense.

The compulsory subject, Afro-Brazilian History and Culture, that is studied from the primary school until the high school levels has certainly brought visibility to aspects lesser known concerning both African and Afro-Brazilian cultures and as a counterpart, bibliographical material on these subjects is required. The editorial market (by economic interest, primarily) has been investing in works that tackle the issue.

In this sense, I do want to emphasise that Law 10639⁴ has been amended as to include the teaching of indigenous cultures. This law was not born from top to bottom as many people may tend to think. And neither has the quota system. For those who may not be familiar with the demands of the Brazilian Blacks throughout history, maybe it would be a good opportunity to get acquainted with some of the claims of the Teatro Experimental do negro⁵ (Black People's Experimental Theater) that goes back to 1945, under the direction of Abdias Nascimento.

CC & IC: *How do you assess the current Afro-Brazilian literary production?*

CE: I do not assess it. I would only state that there are texts which seduce and others do not do so.

CC & IC: *Concerning Black women's situation in Brazil: has it developed?*

CE: Yes, in spite of everything. Increasingly, we are imposing our voices and conquering other spaces. However, our representativeness is still minimal when the presence of white women in places of decision is considered. If such places lack the presence of women, when it comes to the presence of Black women, this absence is most strongly felt. Black ministers, black judges, black deans, heads of departments in academic institutions, and the CEO's in large companies are only a few. And no need to get out of our field of expertise, of our surroundings. In the undergrad and postgraduate courses, how many black professors are there? I do want to point out that we want, we are entitled to the right, we need and we are seeking for much more. Our path has no turning back. We are walking towards occupying places in political parties, in the ministries, in the academies, in the multiple fields of knowledge, in the media, in sports, in the most varied forms of art. Beyond our individual recognition, our personal victories need and must relate in one way or another to the black collectivity, especially for black women.

CC & IC: *Regarding your literary tastes, how have they had an impact on your writing?*

CE: I begin with Lima Barreto. I admire his courage for showing the open wound, creating characters and plots that denounce the existing racism in Brazil. I also like his writing due to his proclaiming the desire to write the history of the Brazilian blacks as in his work *Diário Intimo*. Cruz e Souza is also another one, the poet who suffered prejudice from the Brazilian society of his time. From Luiz Gama, the Orfeu de Carapinha, that ridiculed Brazilian slave society, which even though it had mixed races, still wanted to go through a whitening process. According to Solano Trindade, the modernist author, that is not registered in the Brazilian modernist historiography. Maria Firmina dos Reis, the first abolitionist writer, who outlined African enslaved characters infusing them with a dignity of their own, not complying with the representation that was given to the Africans and their descendants at the time she was producing her work. As for the contemporary, I highlight my appreciation for many. Adão Ventura, one of the first black poets I knew. Still talking about mineiros' writers, Edimilson Pereira, Ricardo Aleixo, and Waldemar Euzébio. I greatly enjoy the poetry of Ana Cruz, Miriam Alves, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Lia Vieira, among others and also the short stories. Geni Guimarães and her books, *Leite de Peito* and *Cor da Ternura*, lead me to my sisterhood in writing. From *Cadernos Negros*, also a great moment for learning: Carlos Assunção, Oliveira Silveira, Cuti, Marcio Barbosa, Paulo Colina, Jamu Minka. The only book of poems by Nei Lopes, *Incursões sobre a pele*, is also fascinating. From the ones who started publishing recently, Alan da Rosa, the poems and the play *Filomena da Cabula* and his texts for children. I am delighted with Sacolinha's scathing and also Ana Maria Gonçalves, and her *Defeito de cor*; and also Cidinha da Silva's texts. Nonetheless, my deference, particularly speaking for transforming trash into something writeable and also for her writing in the midst of hunger (an aspect which few apprehend since the writer is read as someone who only spoke about her material lack) is for Carolina Maria de Jesus.⁶ From the canon I have read a lot and I can affirm that my reading background passed by Machado de Assis, Jorge Amado, José Lins do Rego, Graciliano Ramos, Guimarães Rosa, José Mauro Vasconcelos, Oto Lara Resende, Mário Palmério and other Brazilians and foreign authors. I revel in the mineira writer Adélia Prado, as well as the mineiro Autran Dourado. In the late '70s, with Professor Simone Caputo Gomes, who was teaching in Rio de Janeiro at the time, I discovered the African Literatures in Portuguese Language. Concerning the influence that such tastes have left in my writing I may not be able to say. Only critics and readers can evaluate that.

CC & IC: *Your novel Ponciá Vicêncio was made compulsory reading for some entrance exams. Has this changed your responsibility as a writer?*

CE: I don't know. I think I hadn't conceived a responsibility for the author. A writer cannot do anything alone. The writer attends to his/her writing, with his/her words, literature, books but is secluded from the world, and cannot do much. I believe that the writer has the same power as a doctor, a teacher, a geographer, or an historian if he is embedded in a greater group struggle, rather than as an individual acting alone. Although I do acknowledge that literature has the power to provoke emotions, it can touch people's feelings. Owing to that, Maria Nova, a character from the novel *Becos da Memória*, while listening, reading and experiencing so many histories also experiences several feelings and makes her discoveries which I relate to the act of writing. As I see it, writing can be a kind of vengeance, at times I think about that. I don't know if it is vengeance, maybe a challenge, a way to hurt the imposed silence, or rather, perform a gesture of stubborn hope. Yet I like to state that writing is for me the dance-chant movement that my body does not perform; it is the password by which I access the world. And I add to that the *escrevivência*⁷ of Black women cannot be read as stories that lullaby those from the Master's house; on the contrary, these are stories made to bother them in their unjust sleep.

The fact that *Ponciá Vicêncio* has been made into compulsory reading for the entrance test did not change my attitude as a writer, but instead has awarded me a certificate for something I have previously posed, concerning the main character. Ponciá's loneliness touches the reader. Those were emotional moments, when students from both private and public schools reported the feelings evoked by reading the book. I only told them my wish. I hoped that they would not stop at the feelings aroused by the book, but that instead that they would try to change those feelings into concrete acts of responsibilities towards the others, at any future position they would choose. After reading the book, one of the students from one of the best private schools in Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais, reported the following comment to a teacher of his. He told him that he had never paid attention to the distance that separates his bedroom, located at the prime portions of the house, and the maid's bedroom, located at the service area. And so many others came to me to say that the reading reminded them of stories told by their mothers, aunts, grandmothers... As for the former ones I had nothing to say: they were in the quest for a better life.

CC & IC: *Your narratives are marked by elements from the African tradition. How do you place them at your works?*

CE: Gladly I return to the remains of all I have heard in my childhood. Stories originated from African cultures, especially the Bantu root. I was not surrounded by books in my childhood, but rather was surrounded by words. And how many stories have I heard... Today I take advantage of these elements in a conscious form, particularly language. I am aware of the expressions used by my mother and by other people from my family. It is a pedagogy of orality. My whole family clan continues in Minas Gerais. The mineiro jargon, marked by a series of Bantu words, is still very much alive in my ears. One of the most remarkable experiences of my childhood which I appropriated in the construction of the novel *Ponciá Vicêncio* was the meaning of the image of the rainbow and the risk of the celestial snake for children. I grew up listening since I was little girl that anyone who would pass under the rainbow would be turned into a boy. My sisters, along with me, kept this fear during all our childhood. Recently I have learned that my brothers, younger than us, lived this imaginary also. If they passed under the celestial snake they would be changed into girls. The text opens and closes with the image of a rainbow in the sky. One day, seven years after I had written that story on a late afternoon, I caught a glimpse of a rainbow grooming the sky. The childhood memory came back followed by the image of Oxumaré, the orisha represented by the rainbow snake, a Nagô divinity that is both male and female at the same time. Never before had the coloured arch seemed so beautiful. At that moment, looking at the sky, I unveiled the foundation of an imaginary lived throughout my childhood. An imaginary that had been constructed from traces, remains of elements of an African culture my mother naturally transmitted to us. My family comes from a Catholic tradition. It was necessary that I found out *Candomblé*, in Rio de Janeiro, to learn the sense of a mythic narrative that was kept even in a broken, mutilated, form under the folds of another religious tradition, the Catholic. I was overwhelmed by a huge emotion. We lost the origins of the myth, but something strong from the Black African tradition abided in us. *Ponciá Vicêncio* was already done. It was possible, as I saw it, to enlarge the representation of the myth. And in Nei Lopes' *Dicionário Banto do Brasil* I found the entry *Angorô*, an entity that belonged to the *Candomblé* grounds of Bantu lineage and that is the counterpart of Oxumaré, in the Nagô *Candomblé* grounds. And the word rainbow is substituted by the Bantu term at the end of the novel.

CC & IC: *We are aware that in general terms Brazilian literature presents Black female characters as sensuous and dangerous. How do you compose the Black female as the protagonists of their own stories in a country in which male values are still overwhelming patriarchal?*

CE: It's simple. When I am writing, I do not think about these difficulties. I know they exist, but I do not create a discourse based on these data. I am so sure of the role of black women as the matrix of life in every way, that despite the suffering and death that plague the characters I create, there are those who live there. The saga of Maria Vicêncio and Vicêncio Ponciá is one of pain, death and life. And so is that of Natalina. There is a recovery of life after the rape. Querência, Duzu's granddaughter, is an exemplary character similar to Mary-Nova. Grandma Rita, Maria Velha, Ma Joana and even Ditinha are women who eternally reinvent themselves. In silence, the protagonists of 'Beijo na Face' try to overcome the everyday violence. Similarly to the mother, the narrator of 'Olhos d'água', has her eyes contaminated by Oshun's water. There, the three women — the narrator, her mother and her daughter, in a bond, transmit strength and wisdom — repeating the sense of the matrilineal heritage as in the poem 'Vozes Mulheres'. In 'Ayoluwa, a alegria do nosso povoado', the woman is the redeemer, not by death, not by the cross, but by birth, through life. My 'escrevivência' is born and crafted by what we are, by what Black women are. And then I have fertilising elements to serve as padding for my fiction. My Black women are others.

NOTES

- ¹ This interview was conducted by Claudia Maria Fernandes Corrêa and Irineia Lina Cesario, and coordinated by Lynn Mário trindade Menezes de Souza and Simone Caputo Gomes from the University of São Paulo, Brazil.
- ² In 2007 this novel was published in translation as *Poncia Vicencio* (trans. Paloma Martinez-Cruz).
- ³ All of these poems were published in different editions of *Cadernos Negros* and also in Evaristo's recent collection of poems entitled *Poemas das Recordação e Outros Movimentos*.
- ⁴ Law 10639 was passed in 2003; it made the subject of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture compulsory study from primary to the high school levels.
- ⁵ The Teatro Experimental do Negro (Black People's Experimental Theater) was founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1944 and its aim was to work towards Black people's advancement through education, culture and arts.
- ⁶ Carolina Maria de Jesus, *Child of the Dark*.
- ⁷ The term 'escrevivência', which could be translated as 'writing the experience', is a term used by Conceição Evaristo to characterise her writing.

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Conceição Evaristo

VOZES-MULHERES

A voz de minha bisavó ecoou
criança
nos porões do navio
Ecoou lamentos
de uma infância perdida.

A voz de minha avó
Ecoou obediência
Aos brancos-doncos de estudo

A voz de minha mãe
ecou baixinho revolta
no fundo das cozinhas alheias
debaixo das trouxas
roupagens sujas dos brancos
pelo caminho empoeirado
rumo à favela.

A minha voz ainda
ecoa versos perplexos
Com rimas de sangue
e
fome

A voz de minha filha
recolhe todas as nossas vozes
recolhe em si
as vozes mudas caladas
engasgadas nas gargantas.

A voz do minha filha
recolhe em si
a fala e o ato.
O ontem — o hoje — o agora.
Na voz de minha filha
se fará ouvir a ressonância
o eco da vida-liberdade.

WOMEN'S VOICES

My great-grandmother's voice echoed
child
in the ship's hold
Echoed laments
of a lost youth.

My grandmother's voice
echoed obedience
to the white omnipotent 'massas'

My mother's voice
echoed soft revolt
in the back of strange kitchens
underneath the bundles
dirty white men's clothes
by the dusty road
that leads to the favela.

Yet my voice
echoes perplexed verses
with rhymes of blood
and
hunger

My daughter's voice
preserves all our voices
preserves itself
the mute quiet voices
caught in our throats

My daughter's voice
preserves itself
In speech and in acts.
Yesterday — today — now
In my daughter's voice
one can hear the resonance
the echo of life-freedom.

(Translation by Celeste Dolores Mann. Used with permission.)

SUSAN N. KIGULI

Performer-Critics in Oral Performance in African Societies¹

THE IDEA OF PERFORMER-CRITICS

Scholarship in African literature has had to admit the central role that live performance plays in the literary material coming from and focussing on the different parts of Africa. A debate on how oral literature and live performance should be analysed still rages, particularly since many scholars look at the subject from a Western view point that not only categorises the work according to schemas based on writing and Western perception, but also concentrates on written literature. Besides many of the scholars who have examined verbal arts in Africa have not emphasised understanding the work within its specific contexts, time and even intercultural connections without imposing on it preconceived rules or subdivisions.

I am not arguing that no European theories can be applied to African oral literature but scholars should not feel that this is a prerequisite. I concur with Olabiyi Babalola Yai when he states:

In the domain, standard practice by African and non-African students of African oral literatures is to posit a *tabula rasa*. Since African cultures are reputedly 'preliterate', it is assumed that they thereby lack a tradition of literary criticism, the latter being – so it is largely and strongly believed — an attribute of literate cultures. (6)

I propose in the light of the above comment that we should look carefully at what is available in the oral literature that we study and utilise it for a meaningful discourse.

Live performance is widely practiced in the different parts of Africa and one way of acknowledging its significance is by examining its practice within its environment, realizing that it demands its own intellectual space. In my view, performers joining the discussion as actively as academic critics will provide insight into the what and how of African oral performance. As Mineke Schipper argues:

In art history as well as literary studies, certain methods of approach have been mainly developed on the basis of Western material. Today more than ever researchers have become aware of the problems resulting from this academic legacy: the problem cannot be solved but awareness means a certain advantage. (1)

This essay attempts to go beyond awareness to use the voices of performer critics as part of the effort to break out of scholarship based mainly on models of the West that encourage strict categorisations of genres and adherence to understanding form and practice as it presents itself in contemporary Western traditions and cultures. The essay also uses research data from two different countries and

regions as a way of widening and promoting analyses of commonalities and differences between regions on the African continent. A number of studies have pointed out the heterogeneity of Africa's cultures and argued strongly against a monolithic view, especially as far as languages and experiences are concerned. I found the extract below from an interview with V.Y. Mudimbe, a scholar and creative writer who is widely recognised for challenging the canonical paradigms applied to African literary as well as philosophical studies, pertinent here:

Sincerely, I think that the response is quite easy and I gave it to you already by saying that no one has given me the mission of being a prophet in the name of Africa, of being someone committing Africa to anything. By the way we have been using a lot the concept of Africa. I can say that I do not know exactly what this concept means. I can speak about my country, I can speak about my experience, about the communities to which I belonged or still belong. (Smith 976)

As seen in Mudimbe's answer, there has been an effort to reposition the approach to the concept of Africa and how it functions in light of the differences and similarities in, for example, politics, tradition and the arts. It is important while examining oral performance in Africa and, in my case, study of South Africa and Uganda, to realise that practices can only be fairly assessed, understood and used based on how well the practitioners in the field and the intellectuals hold a dialogue about how the forms are developing in the communities concerned. My point is that it is vital to realise how oral poets and performers perceive their world and art and work from within their conceptual worlds and within their value systems. Policy makers and academics who find themselves performing simultaneously as outsiders and insiders to the culture, have to use as well as understand their double role. They have to take into consideration the seriousness with which practitioners take their conceptual cultures. I agree with Appiah when he observes:

We all experienced the persistent power of our own cognitive and moral traditions: in religion, in such social occasions like the funeral, in our experience of music, in our practice of dance, and, of course, in the intimacy of family life. (7)

The poets' performances are informed very much by what Appiah calls 'conceptual heritage' and the practical situation on the ground in the environments of performance. It is therefore necessary to allow the poets and performers to participate in the interpretation of their work and contexts alongside the researcher. Prioritising the voices of poets and performers brings their techniques and world view to centre stage and compels the researcher and academic to contend with, involve and question these views in a more informed manner.

Even scholars devising critical theory from an African perspective have been inclined to treat practitioners as supplementary sources. For example, Appiah in his debate on the role of intellectuals in building an African based knowledge system is astonishingly quiet about the presence of an enormous body of knowledge on oral literature and its producers. He engages with the written work and its critics.

He treats verbal arts as the first step towards a more established and higher form (132). This could be the same reason he discusses modern literature as entirely separate from the traditional and does not acknowledge the crossing of boundaries in these categories. He suggests that the Western body of knowledge and analysis and the thinking of African educated intellectuals is the way to understanding and creating a stable body of critical theory:

Let me say, finally, why I think that the gap between educated Africans and Westerners may not be so wide for much longer, and why all of us will soon find it hard to know from within the nature of an individual. *The answer is simple enough; we now have a few generations of literate African intellectuals and they have begun the process of examining our traditions. They are aided in this by the availability of Western traditions, their access to which, through writing, is no different from Westerners.* The process of analysis will produce new, unpredictable, fusions. Sometimes, something will have to give. What it will be, I cannot predict, though I have my suspicions, and you will be able to guess what they are when I say that it seems to me that the overwhelming political and economic domination of the Third World by the industrialized world will play its part. The fact that our culture's future has the chance of being guided by a theoretical grasp of our situation is an extraordinary opportunity.

(Appiah 216 [my emphasis])

In my opinion, Appiah needs to acknowledge that working primarily from our own systems of knowledge may in fact be central to a more sensitive interpretation of both our intellectual and literary practices.² In his argument about intellectuals, Appiah is largely informed by the work of Frantz Fanon. Although Fanon's analysis of the position of the colonised and the coloniser and alienated intellectuals is a groundbreaking one, his observation is made in general terms and does not point out the heterogeneity of Africa's pre-colonial structures. As David Caute notes, Fanon had 'a single vision for the continent and a single solution' (79).

Femi Osofisan has an effective argument when he comments on Africa's marginality in the 'popular' postcolonial debate. Our concern should not be the creation of Western equivalents of theory or literary models. I think we should not seek to create performances that simply echo European modes but rather to give space to the analysis and consequently the understanding of how our contexts work. Osofisan observes:

In Africa we have our own battle of Identity, of course, but it is not the same as that of postcolonialism, and where it concerns individuals and the private psyche, not the most urgent of our preoccupations. And this no doubt, may be one of the reasons Africa, so far has featured only marginally in the wonderful 'postcolonial' debate. (1)

I share Osofisan's view that our urgent concerns should not be concentrated on demystifying the 'racist myth' or even on recovering the past, but rather on the importance of connecting with our own artistic productions and perceptions. This would focus discussion on the creation of a body of critical works that come from us as participants in the production of systems of understanding our own current discourse by focusing on the poets' and performers' views and performance, I

am attempting to position the debate on them as producers and critics of their performances. As Osofisan further notes:

Obviously, then, if we have a great battle to fight for survival at all, the first place to start *must be on the home front*. Thus, while the target of orientalism — and of postcolonialism, its offspring — is the West (a front which we must leave to our diasporic kinsmen and women to fight) the target of our own battle must be, and has been, ourselves. (5)

As Osofisan points out, we can only fully comprehend our literary products by being in touch with what is taking place in our communities. I argue that one way of being in touch is to speak to the performers of oral works who serve a significant part of Africa and reflect the current reality of the particular places and performers that produce them.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has argued consistently on the issue of perception and presentation of literature that comes from and talks to its own people. In his case, he concentrates on how African literature in general stands vis-a-vis the colonial and the neo-colonial world. Ngugi also points to one rather crucial but perhaps general point, the centrality of acknowledging one's location in order to obtain a full and meaningful existence. The poets' views firmly define the 'groundedness' of their creativity. This may also explain why the poets I interviewed or whose performances I attended were keen to point out to me the importance of the performer-audience relationship and their connection to 'traditional' or cultural memory.

It is crucial to question and to place these performances using a cultural understanding of history, literature and society as a whole. In his studies of the importance of oral performance Richard Bauman points out its rootedness in people's ways of thinking and life. Performances spring from what he refers to as 'deeply situated human behavior'. The text in this situation is not independent of the techniques of composition or situations of production; rather, it constitutes a whole event. In essence the examination of the performances and the material produced should seek to make meaning of the locatedness of what is being performed. To understand the function of oral poetry, it is useful to understand the actual composition and performance processes. Mazisi Kunene highlights the importance of performance in oral poetry:

Zulu poetry is traditionally composed to be performed whether it is a nursery rhyme or a heroic poem. Performance is such an integral part of Zulu traditional poetry that its meaning can only be fully realized in the dramatization. The public nature of the performance requires not only a skilled presentation by an actor-poet but also the active involvement of the audience. It is not uncommon for the members of the audience to make complementary side comments on the episodes of a poem as the poet narrates and acts out his words. (Kunene xxxi)

Performance is a communicative process in which performer, audience and the social practice of oral poetry are vital for the interpretation and understanding of the genre. The performer is important in the performance event and analysing his

or her views will contribute to understanding the relationship between performer, composition process, audience, purpose and the overall context in which the performances of oral poetry occur.

In this essay, ideas of what the performer does are analysed with emphasis on the interpretation of the performer and the environment of performance in terms of values, beliefs and ideologies at play. The context then has not been read narrowly as constituted by the text but as socially constructed and culturally determined construct that is subject to the dynamism of change and timing.

There are tensions, such as reconciling the rhythms and structures of an oral performance to an academic and predominantly literate space, faced by critics dealing with the field of orality that makes critics such as Tim Couzens use inverted commas when referring to oral literature (6). He seems undecided on the literariness of the oral genres but does not provide an explanation for his discomfort. The literary debate in South Africa, for example, is still dominated by the written text. More on what is happening in the field of oral literature needs to be heard. As Landeg White puts it:

We need an aesthetic deriving not from external models or theories of orality but from evidence of African texts and from the comments of performers and audiences in Africa about the nature of the literature they value. This task has barely begun. (1989 35)

White emphasises the importance of transforming the perceptions of African oral literature by taking approaches that use it as a centre of its own theorisation. I found in the course of my research that in Buganda for instance, the performers had a number of critical terms they used that they considered central to the construction of an oral poetry performance. They painstakingly explained terms such as *ebisoko* (which primarily means poetic idioms), *ebikwate* (which means received used interchangeably with crammed or sometimes spoken poetry or a high form of prose) versus *ebintontome* (which refers to chanted or recited poetry with an implied meaning of it being highly original) and *ebigambo ebiwerere* (which means refined prose).

The failure to place the work within its context leads to the impression that these performances cannot occupy a central locus in the main literary discourses of Africa. In my understanding of African situations, it is when these genres that are usually labelled informal are taken up and studied with an awareness of the environment within which they operate that they can begin to acquire prominence.

ORAL POETS IN BUGANDA

A keen sense of the development of both poetic and musical forms embedded in the life of Buganda as a kingdom pervades discussion on the life and work of oral poets. A body of debate surrounds the idea of Buganda³ as a kingdom/nation (gwanga) whose people are conscious of their identity and are eager to assert their history and connect themselves to the kingdom. Devotion to unity is still vital to identity even in the post-civil war era where the central government of

Uganda has political control over the kingdom of Buganda. The kingdoms in Uganda are currently cultural institutions without any political powers and the 1995 constitution clearly states their apolitical status.

In my interviews with performers on the nature and role of performance and their relationship to social change, there has been constant reference to the influence of the generations of past oral poets as well as to the musicians at the Buganda court on the life and work of the contemporary poets. The king's palace, the chiefs' courts and cultural functions in the kingdom have direct connections to the poetry and music that is produced in the kingdom. Most poetry in Buganda was put to music both at the royal court and outside it. The kings' harpists in past generations are said to have sometimes chanted poems at court but the harpists who now play before the king do not recite poems before him.

Recited poetry in Buganda is associated more closely with life outside the court. The folk poems in circulation are very popular in the countryside and in schools. In 2001 I visited Lugazi West Primary School in Mukono district in Eastern Buganda and the children recited folk poems without effort. One of Buganda's well known poets, Phoebe Nakibuule Mukasa explains:

Recently in July, 2001, I adjudicated at the annual poetry competitions for Buganda schools. The poems had to be in Luganda. The children from rural areas did better than the urban children. Yet they were all composing on the same theme. Some very old folk poems still exist in rural areas. If you go to the village and hear children at play, you will realise that many old poems still exist. (Kiguli 2001b np)

The oral poems are not all regarded as children's rhymes. Old poems that seem to have been composed by adults are being taught to children in primary schools. Nakibuule Mukasa who recorded and co-edited a book of oral poems points out:

I recorded oral poems and wrote them down to preserve them. I showed the collection to Professor Livingstone Walusimbi and later the poems were printed... The poems are indirect and have deep hidden meanings. Children even recite them without being aware of the hidden meaning. We realised this and this particular book was elevated to an 'A' Level text. Children all over Buganda recite these poems but serious study of them is at a higher level. (Kiguli 2001b np)

The composers of folk poems are not known but most people know the names of the people who recorded and edited them. Most poets in Buganda are also musicians, and I found very few that did not recite as well as sing. The poets who recite also feel a strong sense of loyalty to the king, and even though their compositions are more to do with day-to-day experiences, they point out that they compose poems on the kings and the kingdom. One of the poets, Kaddu Mabbirizzi, who won the title Poet of Poets in Buganda (*Sabatontomi wa Buganda*), three times in the Buganda poetry competitions organised by the king's court, says that he has composed more about the dead kings than the present king. His aim is to recreate their lives for the children who have no immediate sense of what it was to live under the past kings. He says:

In my life, I avoid political themes, especially when I learnt the cause of Kawadwa's murder under Amin... But when it comes to the king, I compose with all my heart. I feel that my love for the kingdom comes from my very being therefore composing about kingship is part of me. I love the king very much and when I compose poems about him I feel everything coming together. My king is in my blood: he is my blood. In fact I have recited before the present king several times. I was chosen to recite when he was on tour. I was chosen from Kaggo Malokwezi County. I wrote a beautiful poem for him. It was even broadcast on Radio Uganda. Ooh! When it comes to *Ssabasajja, Bbenne, Ccuccu, Mukono Nnantawetwa, Ssemanda* - I do my very best.

(Kiguli 2001a np)

Recited poetry is still very important in Buganda. It is not strictly identified with the court but it recognises the existence of the king and his relationship to the community.

PERFORMANCE CULTURE IN ANKOLE AND ITS DIRECT RELATIONSHIP TO *EBYEVUGO*

Whereas in Buganda, my main focus has been on the poetry sung to music, particularly that originating from the king's palace, in Ankole the focus will be on the heroic recitations because of their centrality to the cultural life of the Banyankole. Scholars have pointed out that Ankole is a colonial formulation born out of the expansion as well as the mispronunciation of the name Nkore during colonial expansion.⁴ The pre-colonial kingdom of Nkore was smaller than the present counties of Kashari, Isingiro and Nyabushozi in Ankole. With the coming of the British, Ankole was formed and the independent states of Igara, Busimba, Bunyaruguru and Buhweju were incorporated into the kingdom. The former kingdom of Mpororo, which includes the current counties of Kajara, most of Rwampara and most of Sheema, also became part of Ankole, and the Ankole Agreement of 1901 officially recognised the expansion of Nkore into Ankole. Presently, Ankole is composed of the districts of Mbarara, Bushenya and Ntungamo.

Ankole is made up of two groups, the Bahima and the Bairu, although currently there are other groups of people settled in Ankole, among which are notable populations of Banyarwanda, Bakiga and Baganda. The Bairu are said to be the original inhabitants of the area and currently comprise eighty percent of the population. Theories defining and seeking to explain the Bahima's aristocratic status say they originated from the horn of Africa and claim Hamitic origins for them. The Bahima and the Bairu of Ankole speak the same language with dialectical variations. While the Bahima are pastoralists, the Bairu are agriculturalists. The Bahima speech is rich in cattle terminology. Although the Bahima are far less in number than the Bairu, they traditionally formed the aristocratic class of the Nkore kingdom. The royal clan, known as the Bahinda, belongs to the Bahima ethnic group. Traditional accounts in Ankole indicate that there are four main clans — the Bahinda, the Bashambo (from whom the royal family of the former Mpororo kingdom originated), the Bagahe and the Baishikata.

Presently in Ankole, *omugabe* (king) has not been restored because of strong anti-monarchy feelings among the Bairu. Whereas Prince Charles Aryajja

Rwebishengye Barigye is recognised as an heir-apparent to the kingdom, he has not officially been installed. The main argument has been that re-establishing the monarchy will lead to civil strife. A number of people interviewed argued that for unity and integration to continue in Ankole, the monarchy ought not to be restored.

In my interview with Stephen Rwangyezi, the founder of Ndere Troupe, national chairperson of Uganda Development Theatre Association and *omwewugi*⁵, he was reluctant to discuss the political and social inequalities among the Bairu and the Bahima and when he did, he was very careful to explain the Bairu-Bahima relationship as he perceived it:

You see, Bahima and Bairu, I would say are rather derogatory terms that developed with time. We had Banyankore, the people of Nkore. If you return to the creation myths, for example that of the three sons of Ruhanga, this myth tells you of children that lived together without distinction until a certain time when the father had to name them and give them a test. 'Hold this milk and I will check on you in the morning'. The youngest son fell asleep and his milk poured out, and his brothers topped up for him and he did not sleep again. Later in the night, the eldest slept and poured all his milk, and the rest refused to help him because he had absolutely nothing left. The second son had half because he had given some to the youngest, and the youngest had a full gourd. When the father came in the morning, he declared the youngest king and said that all his descendants would be kings. The second, Kahima, with a half gourd, would keep the cows and be near the king and Kairu, with absolutely nothing, was declared the servant. That justifies the roles in traditional society. If you went to work for a wealthy *muhima* you became his *mwiru* (servant). There are two types of servants. *Omuchumba* is a destitute and will work for food and shelter but *omwiru* is someone who comes to work for pay and eventually goes back to his own farm. The *mwiru* identity crept on to the family of the person who had come to serve and they were all labelled *abairu*. With the coming of colonialism, these differences were polarised. (Kiguli 2001 np)

Rwangyezi's views of the socio-political relationships in Ankole before colonialism correspond with the historian Samwiri Karugire's. They both argue that the Bahima-Bairu relationship was a symbiotic one where the system of *okuchuroka* (equivalent to barter trade) existed. According to this view, occupational differences also determined the differences in social behaviour and manners. They point out that even though Bahima and Bairu shared many customs, religious practices and beliefs, there were instances where the codes of conduct were different. Most people I interviewed argued that it was important to understand these relationships in order to understand why in the past most Ankole praise poets were Bahima and even currently Bahima praise poets tend to think they know the art better than the Bairu ones.

H.F. Morris presented *ebyevugo* (heroic recitations) as if they exclusively belonged to *bahima* (10–11). In my discussions with different people on the issue of the heroic recitations, it emerged that it was not as straightforward as Morris made it seem. Rwangyezi observed:

If we are talking about *kwevuga* being for Bahima, then there would be no *byevugo* in Kabale so the historical thing was not merely according to class but it was about

Banyankore–Bakiga as tribes. The difference between them is thin, only the Bakiga are more republican and are agriculturalists. (Kiguli 2001 np)

Rwangyezi argues that we cannot view *ebyevugo* as a possession of one group of people within Ankole since the neighbouring tribe of the Bakiga also have *ebyevugo*. Kigezi borders the north and east of Ankole. In *kiga* tradition, for different occasions such as marriage ceremonies, hunting preparations, war preparations, victory celebrations as well as beer parties, men would come out and praise themselves. He further points out that among the Bakiga, the art of composing and performing recitations was exclusive to men. Men were expected to celebrate the qualities of bravery, hard work, courage, endurance and patriotism because according to traditional custom, it was men who usually went to war or hunted dangerous animals.

But according to Patrick Kirindi, well-known Ankole writer, elder and *omwewugi*, in Nkore recitations were composed by both men and women and the distinctions lay in the themes the different sexes discussed. While those composed by men concerned past wars, those by women concerned their beauty. Rwangyezi agrees with this idea when he says:

Yes, traditionally, *ebyevugo bya bakazi* is a completely different form (and he demonstrates). They will talk about the family and they will talk about cattle in their colours, beauty and productivity. Unlike the men who usually talk about cows in terms of famine and wars, the women will praise the actual animal. They have a completely different form although these days, some women recite male *ebyevugo* and people look on in amazement. But that usually goes back to cramming someone else's *ebyevugo*. This can be done by anybody, women, slaves, anybody, but it will not be theirs.

(Kiguli 2001 np)

Mzee John Byaruhanga an elder in Rushere, Nyabushozi also observed exactly the same thing (Kiguli 2001d np) — that in Ankole while men sing and recite about bravery in war and the survival of the cows, the women, who usually accompany their *ebyevugo* with a harp, sing about the beauty of cows and women and the bravery of men. But he also pointed out that times are changing and some women now recite on the same topics as men.

Although a number of sources pointed out that the practice and performance of *ebyevugo* was not exclusive to Bahima — other sources such as Isaac Tibamanya, a renowned *mwevugi* in Nyanga — Rushere expressed the view that in the past, *abevugi* were predominantly Bahima and insisted that he is outraged at the state of the performance of heroic recitations. He said that the strangest change is that people are so ready to recite other people's recitations and that the Bairu basically recite compositions that are not theirs. He even referred to the cases when *ebyevugo* are recorded on tape and 'agriculturalists' put on their radios and listen to them while cultivating their land. He sounded quite puzzled by this phenomenon as he evidently thought that this was a devaluation of the status and philosophy of *ebyevugo*.

Ebyevugo, commonly referred to as heroic recitations, are a very dynamic part of the art of the Banyankore. *Omwevugi*, a person who performs heroic recitations, is seen as a thinker and a social observer. In the past an *omwevugi* was regarded as a person of status. Rwangyezi explained the concept of *okwevuga* at length:

I think the word *okwevuga* has survived more in Runyarwanda than Runyankore. Because of the influence of other people, we adopted the word '*okwegambaho*' which literally means 'talking about yourself'. But *okwevuga* is to self praise so *ebyevugo* have the element of praising yourself for those heroic activities that you had undertaken. You either had succeeded in war and were talking about those very difficult situations that you only went through because of your great tactics, bravery and tough manhood ... or you are talking about cows because cows are everything: it is a convertible currency you have them and you have everything. If you are a good cattle keeper you know about sorting out breeds. You know which breed will give milk, which bull will give you which breed and which cows are resistant to diseases and drought. A cattle keeper will be talking about these cows, but one cannot talk about cows without talking about defending them, and you cannot talk about defence without talking about fighting for them. If you have cattle in their thousands, the pride-worthy ones are the ones with smooth, long white horns, particularly well shaped. We say '*kongambe ente totamu nkankondo*'. In other words, when you talk about cows, we do not talk about the ones with horns facing inwards; we talk about the ones worth talking about. If you have a large herd then you are rich and other things such as social status follow... It is that kind of person therefore that does *okwevuga* because he will be listened to.

(Kiguli 2001 np)

The idea of talking about oneself and one's cows seems to be at the very centre of the Banyankore's idea of *okwevuga*. *Omwevugi* Tibamanya kept referring to the idea that it was possible, for example, to talk about other people's cows and he admitted reciting about President Museveni's cows, but he emphasised, and I will quote his own words:

By the way, I cannot recite about someone else's cows and fail to recite about mine. I am always with my cows. I start with my own cows. (Kiguli 2001c np)

The core of *okwevuga* springs from the ability to be proud of one's achievements and talk about them. All the respondents I talked to had a low regard for people who they said just learnt and recited other people's compositions. They said that it was acceptable to quote someone and explained that quoting or referring to the same event was not the same as copying another *omwevugi*'s poem. The two *bevugi* I interviewed at length vehemently denied reciting other people's compositions.

Susan: Was this really your own composition?

Byakatonda: Yes indeed. It is mine.

Susan: Or did you hear it from someone else?

Byakatonda: No, not at all. Except in instances where I met problems, then I had to sit down in a quiet place and write what I was composing on paper, then I would recite what I had written. (Kiguli 2001e np)

The same idea runs through Tibamanya's interview too:

Susan: Did you learn this from your father?

Tibamanya: Yes, I did. He was a great poet.

Susan: Did he help you?

Tibamanya: Yes, I first recited his but later I began to compose my own. I can even sing. I can for example compose and recite about my interview with you today.

Susan: Are there people, especially elders, who helped you in some of these recitations?

Tibamanya: No, I only listened and then later composed my own. All those I recite have been composed by me...

Susan: May be one other thing I forgot to ask, did all the other reciters you know learn them like you did?

Tibamanya: Well, some others learn from friends and they recite other people's recitations.

Susan: Is that so?

Tibamanya: Because some do listen to others, they will recite what others recited before... But I do not recite other people's recitations. (Kiguli 2001c np)

Abevugi insist that they compose their own poetry not because they want to own the process but mainly because the practice of simply learning other people's recitations violates the core concept of the purpose and what most of them referred to as the philosophy of recitation. *Okwevuga* should start from a person who recites; he must have played a central part in what he discusses. Tibamanya explained that there were cases when different *abevugi* talked about the same events and that was acceptable as long as they did it in a way that showed that they were recounting events in which they participated.

Okwevuga as understood by the Banyankore is regarded as a formal way of getting up to talk about one's own exploits while everybody else listens and agrees as well as approves. The signal for approval is the audience's response of 'eeh' after an *enkome* (stanza). The audience give the performer time to state his exploits and explain the roles he took on during the different events and then chorus in agreement. Traditionally, the performer holds a spear and recounts his heroic deeds. The spear used is a long one, which the performer thrusts back and forth, and when he finishes his performance he plants it in the middle of the circle formed by his audience. Usually the person who thinks that his exploits are better or equal to those of the previous performer picks up the spear and starts talking about himself. Often the gathering follows one theme at a time.

I was told about three other sub-genres which respondents said were related to *okwevuga*. The first is *ekirahiro*. Morris talks about *ekirahiro* as a recitation in praise of a man's cattle where each cow or bull is praised in detail.⁶ Isaac Tibamanya also talked about '*okurahirira omuntu*', still in connection with recitations about cows. He described the origin of '*okurahirira omuntu*' as being inspired by a friend going to visit another and the host delivering a recitation in appreciation of the visit. In the recitation, the person talks about the beauty of the

cattle and the various troubles experienced and overcome by the herdsman and his cows. According to Tibamanya, the recitation presents to the visitor the pride of his host which essentially lies in his possessions, the cows.

The third type mentioned in relation to *okwevuga* was *okwesimirana*. This is a form that one person uses to tell another in public that he is, for instance, wealthier than the person he is addressing. It enumerates what the challenger has and questions the status of the person being addressed. *Okwesimirana* is said to occur at a generally casual level that could degenerate into quarrels and fights. Whereas *okwevuga* is regarded as a formal and higher level and when a person is performing *ekyevugo* the audience give their undivided attention, *okwesimirana* was explained as confrontational. If a person decides that he wants to sit on a better chair or place occupied by the person next to him, then he confronts this person and challenges him to give up the chair. This form originates from the belief that wealth and confidence are necessary features of success. If one falls on hard times then one cannot sit with other men of higher status because one would be challenged using the *okwesimirana* form. Increasing and keeping a large herd among the Bahima is central to their status and identity. The more cows one has the higher one's status. It is a source of concern to the older Bahima that the younger generation find selling a cow an easier task than they did. Rwangyezi explained:

If I told my father that I wanted to sell a cow, he would not sleep that night. 'Sell a cow? Remove a cow from the kraal?' Not unless there is a real disaster. To tell him to sell a cow and reduce their number and for example turn them into books sounds like insanity to him. How will he sit with other men when they are counting the heads of cattle because for every one hundred cows a bell is put on the one that is chosen as the leader of the herd. The bell is called *milere*. So the logic is simple: the number of *milere* is counted and if you have one, you sit with those of one in that order. For my father to start selling and reducing ten *milere* to one, he would rather commit suicide. This whole set up explains the basis of *okwevuga*. It is when a man has that status and can stand before people and pick that spear and openly put it up. If a man's cows are being raided and he runs away during the fight, then he cannot talk. If he comes and finds us talking about cattle, he cannot join in. (Kiguli 2001 np)

The driving force behind *ekyevugo* is proving one's worth as an individual. It begins with the individual and then elaborates or discusses how that particular individual sees other people. In *ekyevugo*, the poet will talk about other people or relations in connection with his experiences.

THE PRACTICE OF PRAISE POETRY AND POPULAR SONG IN KWAZULU NATAL

The recognition of Zulu as a nation began with King Shaka and his military genius in forming a powerful nation out of the Nguni-speaking clans, some of whom live in what is now known as Kwazulu-Natal. The legends of the founding fathers of the Zulu nation play a dominant role in the psyche of the Zulu to date. The Zulu family tree based on genealogical data of kings is part and parcel of royal *izibongo*. From Shaka's reign in 1816, the king's presence and control over events in the Zulu kingdom has been very powerful. This is not to say that the kings

before Shaka were not recognised, but Shaka's power and military campaigns made the royal presence far stronger than it was before. Shaka assimilated a large number of states around him and created a bigger Zulu nation. As noted by Landeg White:

Though the intellectual rules keep altering, Shaka survives as a central object of fascination, and the shifting fashions have themselves become an object of study.
(1982 15)

In Zululand, like other Southern African Bantu speaking nations, praise poetry is regarded as a significant account of historical and social events. The form is common to the Xhosa and Zulu who call it *izibongo*, while the neighbouring Sotho have a similar form they refer to as *lithoko* or *lifela* and the Tswana call it *maboko*. As noted by various scholars, this form is widespread across Africa. During my research, I was struck by the compelling similarities between the praise poetry of Ankole and Zulu.

In Zulu experience however, the form has been strongly associated with the kings by different writers and most probably as a result of that more discussion of the *izibongo* of the kings has taken place. It does not mean that the form was not and is not used beyond the court, it was and is and studies have been done on *izibongo* that centre on ordinary families, clans and individuals. Yet it must be said that the figure of the *imbongi* (praise poet) as a prominent figure at court was and is still prominent.

Praise poetry does not simply refer to just praises; the *imbongi* did and still does more than just praise. He is an analyst of the times in which he lives and those in which his ancestors lived before him. The *imbongi* transcends the moment of performance and is a voice that synthesises old and new experiences.⁷ In an interview with Mazisi Kunene, he explained that the word *izibongo* approximately translated as praise poem coming from the root word *bonga* which could mean either praise or censure and reproach depending on the situations in which the poet was performing or the circumstances of composition. He explained that *izibongo* in Zulu traditions exists along with other poetic genres such as *izithakazelo* translated as clan praises, *amaculo* (songs) and *izaga* (proverbs). He also talked specifically of Zulu traditional lyric poetry which is especially composed to be sung.

Most people emphasised that the *izibongo* of the past kings were very important because they revealed a lot about the nation's history, religion and social structures. *Izibongo*, according to current Zulu beliefs, give a cohesive account of the nation, kings and survival. These claims become important especially since the discussion of events in the *izibongo* give the poets' view of what happened and is happening in the Zulu nation. According to *imbongi* Peuri Dube, it is an analysis presented 'from the ranks of the people' and therefore it reveals in part the thinking and philosophies of the Zulu nation.

Although *izibongo* is more than just court poetry, its link to royalty particularly in the formation of the Zulu identity, cannot be overlooked. The words and voices

of the *izimbongi* have immortalised the kings of the Zulu and created complex figures of history that have partly formed the conscience of the Zulu nation. The term *izibongo* as has been pointed out by various scholars is an elastic one and is linked invariably to other subgenres. Gunner and Mafika link it in particular to *izigiyo* which they translated as the songs to go with the war dance. They show a connection between praising and the performance of *izigiyo*.

THE IMAGE OF THE *IMBONGI* IN PAST AND PRESENT

The *imbongi* has been claimed to be 'the poet of the nation' not only in the present but also in the past. The *imbongi* as a figure in national history has been used to recount the lives of individuals both royal and ordinary, events, victories as well as crises. Some claim the *imbongi* as an official poet whose role is to celebrate national events.

Some respondents commented that one of the things that shaped an *imbongi* is his love for cattle. The young boys learnt praises as they herded cattle. They would recite the praises of their fathers and as they grew older they would develop their own praises. When the cows disappeared as colonial forces took over other sources of inspiration such as a desire to keep the identity of nation and individuals alive took over. An *imbongi* then claims the connection to his ancestors as a point of survival and maintenance of the community's identity and solidarity.

For the modern *imbongi*, the connection to the ancestors and to the cultural knowledge seemed very important. The vital element in their calling seems to be the service to the wider community. Some of the praise singers in Durban also performed for money and were being hired by companies to market the company agenda to the public. An interesting fact for me is that other poets performing in Durban who are not *izimbongi* referred to the *imbongi* and *izibongo* as points of inspiration for them. There are fewer women poets than men. Still they were present and claimed that this trend was started off during the days of the struggle against apartheid when poets such as Nise Malange took to the platform beside the male counterparts such as Alfred Qabula. There was a wave of *imbongi* who were seen to be directly confronting the oppressor and the *izibongo* were then used as part of the weapons of struggle for liberation. *Izibongo* became part of the discourse of protest in the struggle. *Izibongo* and the *toyitoyi* were performed together at rallies, funerals and workers meetings. The worker *izibongo* in what is now Kwazulu Natal was a part of a massive campaign and it was widely recognised.

After the fall of apartheid the form had to be redirected to different purposes. The focus is now on using the *izibongo* to make the community aware of how to improve themselves and in recent years the form has been used in varying degrees to create awareness on issues of health and to fight AIDS. The performances have now ceased to happen in the same way they did in the years of the struggle. Although the system for the royal *izimbongi* has not changed and they still recite for the king, the more visible and accessible *izimbongi* focus on community work

and many of the younger ones use their poetry to earn a living and work for various companies or drama groups depending on the demand.

PERFORMANCE AS UNDERSTOOD BY ORAL POETS I INTERVIEWED

Performance as understood from my interviews with oral poets with whom I interacted is not just about language and action; it also deals deeply with expressing layers of meaning located in both the present and the past. The poets presented their performance as an intense interaction of knowledge, alternative perspectives and experiences in a way that compels both performer and audience to engage in a mental and physical conversation. They mostly thought of performance as a particular way of being, conditioned by performer, audience, time and the cultural context, which compels all participants to engage in analysis of their beliefs, perceptions and prevailing situations. The poets I interviewed came across as possessors of very intimate and critical knowledge about their work. They insisted that their links with their specific historical, cultural and literary locations provide insights into the value of performances and the meaning of content and the general effect of performative events on both performer and audience.

NOTES

- ¹ Some of the ideas in this work are excerpted from my forthcoming book on *Oral poetry and Popular Song in South Africa and Uganda: A Study of Contemporary Performance*. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the American Council of Learned Societies- African Humanities Programme for the post-doctoral research support. I would also like to thank The 4th European Conference on African Studies- ECAS4 for providing me with a conference grant to present this paper on panel 33, ECAS4.
- ² Oyekan Owomoyela in his argument that African Studies should epistemologically and paradigmatically reflect the spirit of the continent points out that Appiah in his analysis of intellectualism suggests that literacy is an epistemic necessity. This reasoning suggests advantage for literate cultures over non-literate ones. Owomoyela, 'With Friends Like these...Critique of Pervasive Anti Africanisms in Current African Studies', p. 80.
- ³ It is essential to point out that from the root 'Ganda' a number of prefixes are added to derive meanings. Buganda stands for the kingdom while Obuganda could mean both the territory as well as the set of cultural norms and values. Luganda refers to the language, Baganda to the people, Muganda to one person and Kiganda to the styles and ways of doing things in Buganda.
- ⁴ See Samwiri Rubaraza Karugire, *A History of the Kingdom of Nkore in Western Uganda to 1896*; Pius Zirimu, 'Some Aspects of the Phonology and Grammar of Runyakore with special reference to Nominals, unpublished M.A Dissertation (Leeds: Leeds University, 1969).
- ⁵ An Ankole oral poet who chants Ankole praise poetry or what may be termed heroic recitations.
- ⁶ See H.F.Morris, *The Heroic Recitations of the Bahima of Ankole*; G.P.N. Kirindi, *Ebyevugo N'ebyesongoro bya Nkore*.
- ⁷ See Archies Mafeje, 'The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary African Community' and Liz Gunner and Mafika Gwal, *Musho: Zulu Popular Praises*.

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ABSTRACTS

ASHLEIGH HARRIS

An Awkward Silence: Reflections on Theory and Africa

This article begins by establishing the ways in which so-called global circuits of theory formation have circumvented Africa as a site where theory is produced. Instead, Africa remains the object of theoretical interpretation, not an active participant in its making. The essay discusses the ways in which the use of postcolonial theory, by both African and non-African scholars, has colluded in these patterns of knowledge distribution, primarily through a demand for an African account of the self. Resisting this call to the African to give an account of him/herself (even in the interests of scholarly ‘hospitality’), the paper considers various investigations into the ethics of letting the other ‘be’. Following the work of Luce Irigaray, I suggest that a true incorporation of African knowledge production in cultural theory would involve the creation of an ‘awkward silence’: this silence would enable the African subject’s refusal to speak *for* the understanding of the West and would thereby require that both African and non-African scholars alike suspend their demands for absolute knowledge of African subjects.

SUSAN N. KIGULI

Performer-Critics in Oral Performance in African Societies

This article aims to use the voices of ‘performer-critics’ as part of the effort to break out of scholarship based mainly on models of the West that encourage strict categorisations of genres and adherence to understanding form and practice as it presents itself in contemporary Western traditions and culture. Scholarship on African Literature has had to admit the central role live performance plays in the literary material coming from and focusing on the different parts of Africa. The study will draw on examples from Buganda, Ankole (Uganda) and Zulu (South Africa) oral poetry in order to widen and promote the analysis of commonalities and differences between these specific cultures on the African continent. Policy makers and academics who find themselves performing simultaneously as outsiders and insiders to the culture, have to use as well as understand their double role. They have to take into consideration the seriousness with which practitioners take their conceptual culture. I contend that the poets’ performances are informed very much by what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls ‘conceptual heritage’ and the practical situation on the ground in the environments of performance. To understand the function of oral poetry performances, it is useful to understand the work within its specific contexts, time and even intercultural connections without merely imposing on it preconceived rules and subdivisions.

GRACE A. MUSILA

Submerged Fault lines: Interests and Complicities in the Julie Ward Murder Case

This article reflects on the intersecting complicities between Kenya and Britain, as revealed in the highly publicised case of the 1988 murder of 28-year-old British tourist and wildlife photographer, Julie Anne Ward, in Kenya. Using John Ward's *The Animals are Innocent*, John le Carre's *The Constant Gardener*, and news articles drawn from Kenyan and British print media, the essay reflects on the configurations of the official British interventions in the case. In his investigations, as documented in *The Animals are Innocent*, John Ward approached the matter with rigid assumptions which constructed British institutions and officials as honest, professional and committed to justice, in sharp contrast with Kenyan officialdom's unprofessionalism and lack of integrity. The essay suggests that these assumptions — which I term 'bipolar lenses' — blinded Ward to the subterranean faultlines of competing interests in the official British involvement in the quest for his daughter's killers. By reading Ward's account of the quest for his daughter's killers alongside a fictional account of a similar quest in le Carre's novel *The Constant Gardener*, and the subsequent revelation of British complicity in the cover-up of the truth behind Julie Ward's death, I illustrate that contrary to popular wisdom about British moral integrity and commitment to justice as sharply contrasted with the failings of the Kenyan officialdom, there were underlying faultlines which suggest continuities and complicities between Kenya and Britain in the cover-up of the truth behind his daughter's death in Kenya. These bipolar lenses — often articulated through notions of Europe's commitment to justice and human-rights as contrasted with postcolonial African states' abuse of these — work to mask the intersections between the two, marked by complicities largely mediated by the interests of capital.

JAMES OGUDE

Whose Africa? Whose Culture? Reflections on Agency, Travelling Theory and Cultural Studies in Africa

Who defines Africa? Who provides the theoretical templates for knowledge production in Africa? This article seeks to answer these questions and to argue for a neo-pragmatic approach to the concept of agency, particularly in relation to knowledge production on the continent. The essay argues that an understanding of multiple varieties of individual and collective agency available to the African subjects will help cultural researchers and scholars to develop an emancipatory discourse and an explanatory model of the continent that is neither imprisoned by inward conceptions of Africa nor fuelled purely by Euro-centric discourses on Africa. Drawing on Edward Said's idea of 'travelling theory', the article seeks to interrogate the totalising discourses of globalisation and related theories, and

indeed, the mobility with which received theories move in and out of the continent, while local perspectives and voices remain repressed.

MARIA OLAUSSEN

Africa's Indian Ocean in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed*

This article explores Africa's Indian Ocean heritage through an analysis of Yvette Christiansë's novel *Unconfessed*. I draw on work on the Indian Ocean World as well as historical sources on slavery at the Cape in order to argue that this literary representation expresses a paradigm shift: it superimposes a racialised Atlantic paradigm with clear divisions between settlers and slaves onto an Indian Ocean paradigm where different degrees of bondage and freedom were experienced within a transnational movement. The literary analysis relates to the function of the colonial archive and argues that expressions of resistance to this particular type of inscription in the novel should be read alongside the visions of freedom and hope which are connected to a disappearing Indian Ocean heritage.

CHRISTOPHER E.W. OUMA

Navigating the Lagos Cityscape in Chris Abani's *Graceland*

This article maps out, through Abani's sixteen-year-old protagonist, Elvis, the city of Lagos as a place of material dystopia but cultural utopia. The scatological imagery employed by Abani is contrasted with the image of the city as a culturally rich topography. Through Elvis, the reader is invited to 'redistribute the sensible', to navigate the city through its cacophonous harmony, to map it out through not only the ocular, but also the aural and nasal. It is only through this redistribution that the reader is able to grasp the order in the chaos, the harmony in the cacophony, but most significantly, the cityscape as a matrix of cultural productivity and liminality and therefore as a political topography for the marginalised occupants of the 'miasmal city' of Maroko, who can effectively map out their resistance, empowered by a 'vernacular cosmopolitanism'.

TINA STEINER

Writing on and over Communal Boundaries: East African Asian Subjectivities in Sophia Mustafa's *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga*

Sophia Mustafa (1922–2005), Tanzanian novelist and political activist of South Asian origin, was highly critical of an identity politics that privileges ethnic identity over national affiliation. This article investigates her complex engagement with East African Asian subjectivities in her novel, *In the Shadow of Kirinyaga* (2001). With a keen eye to capture communal identity in the early part of the twentieth century, her fiction provides a 'critical ethnography' that interrogates minority identity construction within and beyond East African colonies and the emerging independent nation-state. Mustafa's portrayal of East African Asian

community life in careful detail while occupying a political position critical of some aspects of this life, makes her narrative a fascinating testing ground for interrogating nationalism and the status of minorities within state structures. In the journeys of her characters across East Africa and to India, narrow definitions of belonging are contrasted with more cosmopolitan conceptions of movement and travel.

ANDREW VAN DER VLIES

Art as Archive: Queer Activism and Contemporary South African Visual Cultures

This article discusses the work of South African artist, Nicholas Hlobo, and for the purposes of comparison draws on the work of artist-activist photographer Zanele Muholi. Both are known for work concerned with the idea of the archive, which intervenes in the fields of local gender politics and anxieties about the body politic and the politics of the body. In both Muholi and Hlobo's cases, too, we encounter work that grapples with the idea of (sub/)cultural and personal loss, of mourning, and of anxieties about biological reproducibility that are keenly connected with the idea of community and affiliation. My essay considers the pay-offs for invoking questions about what archives that engage with, or that *are* forms of, 'cultural production' might look like, and how they might be read against the grain, to suggest that art might function as an intriguing archive of queer affect and queer knowledge thereby constituting or making possible a different kind of gay and lesbian — as well as aesthetic — activism.

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